



THE POWER OF THE DIASPORA:

A TEACHING CASE ON

ELLEN JOHNSON-SIRLEAF'S 2005 PRESIDENTIAL

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Introduction

Twice imprisoned, held without access to family or lawyers, death threats from high-ranking government officials, a sentence of ten years' hard labour... and she'd never committed a crime.

This is home. It's Liberia, where:

Approximately 250,000 died as a result of the war and more than one million Liberians became refugees or internally displaced persons... 75% of Liberians live on less than one US dollar a day, and 85% are unemployed... education and health facilities are almost non-existent... over 40% of the population have no access to safe and clean drinking water and the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is among the highest in the West Africa region.¹

Life *out* of Liberia might seem very good indeed, especially if it includes a Harvard education followed by respected work with the World Bank and the United Nations. Does one leave all this

contemplation of a presidential victory, as well as the hope of others who wished to see her take the presidency:

- She had already lost one election, albeit not a genuinely free and fair one.
- 87% of Liberian voters were illiterate, meaning that getting her message out required accommodation for this fact.³
- Johnson-Sirleaf, although born in Monrovia, Liberia, had become identified by many with the Americo-Liberian elite, who had, since the country's inception, excluded the indigenous population from civil participation.
- She was a woman, a grandmother, and divorced, in a historically Christian nation broadly untouched by feminist activity.
- Her primary opponent, George Weah, was a wildly popular international football star, whose mass appeal was daunting.
- Johnson-Sirleaf had lived intermittently in Liberia, which could be negatively construed by other candidates.

On the question of whether she could win, the logical answer would be 'no' and while much of the watching world wished to see her win,⁴ the consensus was that Weah would.⁵ On the question of whether she should even have returned to Liberia, having experienced such terror there, again, many would say 'no'. But history is full of cases where the victimized and exiled citizen returns to a homeland.⁶ Members of a Diaspora may leave to find relative security, may indeed embrace the countries to which they have come to build lives, raise families, and often resoundingly impact their new communities, and in Johnson-Sirleaf's case, the global community.

³ One of the operating principles of Perlin's taxonomy of democratic conditions (See Sayle and Sua, 2008, *Creating an International Network of Democracy Builders*, Vol. 2, p 41) is that "Election campaigns provide sufficient information to facilitate informed choice." In a largely illiterate population (itself a fairly undemocratic condition) the dispersal of information is more challenging than in a generally literate population.

⁴ "Johnson-Sirleaf was viewed as the preferred candidate in many Western circles." Harris (1999) 'From 'warlord' to 'democratic' president: how Charles Taylor won the 1997 Liberian elections' *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37, 3 p 444

⁵ "...there is already a consensus throughout the impoverished west African state that by this time next year, Weah, 38, will have made the transition from lethal striker to fully fledged statesman." Retrieved on 12/30/08 from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/george-weah-favourite-to-win-biggest-battle-leading-his-country-off-the-field-679006.html>

⁶ Soljenytsen, for instance, who after a lifetime of persecution in the USSR, was deported in 1974 but returned in 1994, and remained there until his death in 2008. Salman Rushdie returned to India ten years after being exiled for his controversial *The Satanic Verses*. Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan with tragic results, after almost ten years in exile.

Over the course of her 12-year exile, she distinguished herself as an economist for a number of international financial institutions, including the World Bank, and was also director of the Regional Bureau for Africa of the United Nations Development Programme. In short, Johnson-Sirleaf had more power and prestige than many, in a context of physical, professional, and political security. And yet...

Johnson-Sirleaf did run, and won. In the context of understanding the power of Diaspora, the intriguing questions include:

- ! Why did she choose to run?
- ! How is it possible that she won?
- ! What does Johnson-Sirleaf's victory tell us about Diasporas, about citizenship, and democracy?

A cursory understanding of the country and its history is essential to these questions.

Liberia, Past and Present

Liberia has been plagued by paradox from its natal moment. Often described in vaguely magical terms as a country “founded by freed slaves...initially imagined as a haven for ‘free people of colour’”⁷ the invention of Liberia was instead a “response to the paroxysm of racism in the post-emancipation era in the United States.”⁸ It was a far more pragmatic project, undertaken by the American Colonization Society:

Liberia's trajectory since this Janus-faced conception was fraught with conflicting ideologies, but the most devastating and long-lasting internal conflict arose on the matter of who was 'a Liberian,' in terms of civil participation: those distinct and dispersed communities who had long occupied the region, or that 5% of the new nation's population who came from North America? From its beginnings, 'Liberian' referred in practice to freed Black Americans. It may seem ironic that black settlers from America were reluctant to enfranchise the region's indigenous population once the nation declared independence, but it is not unusual for culturally diminished groups, as

during the 1980s”¹⁴ and created fertile grounds for Charles Taylor’s supersession, which became an even greater catastrophe for the country. In 1990, the Economic Community of West African States established a military monitoring group (ECOMOG), which, although it largely failed to bring peace to Liberia, did bring the country (with US aid) to the point where an election could be held. Sayle and Sua¹⁵ point to the fundamental problem with this election:

Despite Carter’s glowing accolades and the UN’s myopic review of the situation, [there were] astounding irregularities manifest in the election process: ... voters were not faced with a choice between candidates for office, but between more war or a desperately needed reprieve from violence.... Observers...did not recognize systemic pressures on Liberians, or that human security is an essential precondition of genuinely democratic choice.

Johnson-Sirleaf of the Unity Party (UP) was one of twelve candidates running against Taylor, and she came in second. Her platform was built on her non-affiliation with Liberia’s wars, having been in exile, but this profile could also look like disengagement with the nation’s politics. Worse,

While her history of brave opposition to the Doe government was well known, she was also seen as a former minister of the Tolbert government and, despite Gola and Kru ancestry, a member of the old urban elite. In an attempt to combat any notions that she might not have the political strength of a male former warlord, the nickname, ‘Iron Lady,’¹⁶ was created.¹⁷

When Taylor declared victory, Johnson-Sirleaf was the only one of the contending candidates to file a protest for the records, but the UP did not pursue this.¹⁸

At the polls, Johnson-Sirleaf stated that ECOMOG soldiers had voted or told people how

¹⁴ Kandeh (2004) *Coups from Below: Armed Subalterns and State Power in West Africa* p 107

¹⁵ *Ibid* p 22

¹⁶ Unfortunately, Johnson-Sirleaf shares this title with women in power generally, suggesting a global lack of imagination or specificity in the application of sobriquets for the ruling female. Others once or currently known as ‘The Iron Lady’ include Golda Meir, Barbara Castle, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Eugenia Charles, and Angela Merkel.

¹⁷ Harris (1999) ‘From ‘warlord’ to ‘democratic’ president: how Charles Taylor won the 1997 Liberian elections’ *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37, 3 p 444

¹⁸ *Ibid* p 439

to vote (IRIN-WA, 21 July 1997), and the donation of US\$1million to IECOM [the Independent Electoral Commission] by the Taylor-friendly government of Taiwan was seen

[w]hile the CPA brought an end to the war, transitional leaders ultimately did little to address its root causes. As a consequence, the campaign brought many unresolved issues into focus, particularly in the increasingly tense period before the November 8 run-off election.

Competition for political office at all levels exposed longstanding differences between Liberia's educated elites and the impoverished majority, gender divisions exacerbated by the high incidence of rape and mistreatment of women and girls during the war, the generational divide between elders and a burgeoning young population with limited access to education, employment and land resources, and conflict over the control of revenues derived from Liberia's natural resources.²⁰

Twenty-two candidates stood for the Presidency. This group included Roland Massaquoi, a protégé of Charles Taylor, Sekou Conneh, a former rebel leader, as well as Weah and Johnson-Sirleaf, who emerged as the early leaders. Where Weah appealed to Liberia's younger, poorer citizens, Johnson-Sirleaf was supported by the middle classes.²¹ On the first ballot, Weah finished first with 28.3% of the vote, with Johnson-Sirleaf coming second with 19.8%. As predicted, both advanced to the run-off. The remaining votes were spread between the remaining candidates, with three attracting over 5%. Charles Brumskine, the most prominent of four Christian fundamentalist candidates, finished a strong third place with 13.9% of the vote.²²

The run-off did not initially look promising for Johnson-Sirleaf. Weah received endorsements from many of the losing presidential candidates and victorious legislators while Johnson-Sirleaf's most prominent endorsement was from Joseph Korto, who had placed only seventh in the first round. Brumskine refused to publicly support either candidate. Many of the losing candidates ultimately proved incapable of bringing their supporters to their preferred candidates, though Johnson-Sirleaf's key endorsements seemed to be somewhat more effective. Campaigning for the run-off revealed many shortcomings of Weah's campaign. Speaking to

²⁰ The Carter Center (2005) 'Preliminary Statement of the NDI / Carter Center – International Observer Delegation to the Liberian Presidential Runoff Election' *News Release by the Carter Center*, p 4-5. Available Online: <www.cartercenter.org/documents/2245.pdf>.

²¹ Katharine Houreld (14 September 2005) "A taste of freedom" *openDemocracy News Analysis*. Available Online: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/liberia_2838.jsp>.

²² David Harris (2006) 'Liberia 2005: an unusual African post-conflict election' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 44, 3, p 383; Amos Sawyer (2008) 'Emerging Patterns in Liberia's Post-Conflict Politics: Observations from the 2005 Elections' *African Affairs*, 107, p 177-199.

supporters in one County, Weah seemed to ignore the implications of his words on neighbouring counties. Where Johnson-Sirleaf traveled by helicopter, Weah traveled by road. Harris refers to the “increasingly paranoid and potentially dangerous statements” made by officials of Weah’s party. Ultimately, Harris suggests that Johnson-Sirleaf “ran one of the most political of all campaigns, referring to policy and previous political experience, and Weah conducted one of the least political, in that it focused on his celebrity and his lack of a political past,” and which was undermined by those surrounding Weah, many of whom were political and were tainted by their political past. Ultimately, Liberia bought into Johnson-Sirleaf’s educated political position.²³

Johnson-Sirleaf won the run-off with 59.4% of the vote, an impressive result given her 8-point deficit after the first round. Both the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States declared the election to be transparent, but the success of the election was jeopardized by claims from Weah and his supporters that Johnson-Sirleaf could have only overtaken Weah’s lead through fraud. Incidents of violence raised the specter that Liberia could descend back into chaos, but after the National Electoral Commission rejected the allegations of fraud, Weah abandoned his case in late December. As a result, Johnson-Sirleaf was inaugurated

Degrees of Statehood, Democracy and Citizenship !

Statehood

The idea of statehood in Africa begins with Liberia, the continent's oldest 'nation.'²⁵ Mgbeoji argues that Liberia's initial pretensions to statehood were flawed in part by being fully premised on pigmentation; the lighter one's skin (through US miscegenation), the greater one's rights to access, participation, and 'civilizing' leadership in the state:

It is no surprise that, having been fed on a diet of racism and notions of racial superiority on the basis of skin pigmentation, the state of Liberia was founded upon and sustained on the supposed superiority of the light-skinned Americo-Liberian (the elite) over the darker-skinned natives.²⁶

The notion of statehood, if including such definitional criteria as above, is obviously problematic. A further difficulty with configuring Liberia as a state lies in the fact that, excepting the initial settlers, who constituted less than 5% of Liberia's population, the region was and has largely remained a geography inhabited by various distinct ethnicities, among whom alliances and feuds would have always developed and evolved or devolved, but at no time would have understood their communities as being a ruled 'part' of a larger body until they collectively found themselves precisely where they had always been, but which was suddenly 'Liberia.'

In effect, rather than becoming an effective mechanism for the articulation of the means and framework in which life, liberty, and happiness may be enjoyed by its citizens, the African state, from its conception by the Europeans and its checkered life thereafter, has largely been a hostage of manufactured history, foreign or disconnected elitism, and clientelism.²⁷

The challenge of democratization in a context where the structures and principles of the philosophy are themselves foreign and where 'national' history is a myth, is Herculean. If the

²⁵ Mgbeoji (2003) Collective insecurity: the Liberian crisis, unilateralism, and the global order p 2

²⁶ Ibid p 5

²⁷ Ibid p 34

state itself has grown from a “precolonial African nation mutilated into an ahistorical unit run by self-indulgent elites, [creating] a time bomb waiting to explode”²⁸ and “cartographically and culturally disoriented,” then the very legitimacy of governance is a vexing issue, even the possibility of a democratic one. But by the time of Liberia’s 2005 election, it was especially critical that leadership at least break with the country’s long tradition in which:

Direct and uncritical successors of the colonialist contraptions insisted on absolute loyalty to a fictitious nation-state. As Hansen Laments, “though they were African themselves, the leaders ignored African identities, territories, and boundaries in favour of a European defined one.”

Democracy

The problem with defining democracy lies in the complexity of the term’s referents. Postmodernist thinker Jacques Derrida argues that we can never define any term with any finality, in part because what defines a term are other terms whose definitions depend on yet more terms, and so on. ‘Democracy’ might be the best example of this, given how many interpretable variables go into any effort to pin down its meaning. Elections alone do not constitute democracy, however; Perlin rightly notes “citizen participation in voting is but a minimum requirement to consider an electorate politically engaged.”²⁹ The 1997 election in Liberia was no indication of democracy, despite the applause of observers. The incumbent Taylor’s commercial empire had “its own currency, TV, radio, newspaper, international airport and deepwater port...A US official estimated that Taylor may have had access to US\$75 million per year.”³⁰ These resources infinitely outstripped those available to any other candidates. Further, Lyons notes “many Liberians believed that if Taylor lost the election the country would

²⁸ Ibid 26, 31

²⁹ Sayle and Sua (2008) *Creating an International Network of Democracy Builders*, Vol. 2, p 45

³⁰ Harris (1999) ‘From ‘warlord’ to ‘democratic’ president: how Charles Taylor won the 1997 Liberian elections’ !"# %&' () *+&, \$- &. #()\$/ , (01*)\$23' . 0#4, 37, 3 p 434

return to war.”³¹ These are clearly not ideal democratic conditions.

Another of Perlin’s criteria for the facilitation of democracy is that there be a large middle class,

different kinds of debates about the nature of contemporary society.”³³ With an increasing questionability of the concept of nation-state must occur an increasing question of citizenship. In the case of Diaspora, Liberia’s Diaspora is especially interesting, given that this (non)nation’s

development and democracy. We need to come out of these elections with a good leader

Yet the paradoxes of Johnson-Sirleaf's past could count against her among an electorate unwilling to trust in any form of historical elitism. So how did she win?

How Did Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf Become President of Liberia?

Of course there are infinite conjectures to make on how Johnson-Sirleaf won the 2005 election; that for most of her life she had worked tirelessly for her country and had worked even harder to

“But Ellen’s not a woman,” another colleague objects. “She’s... Well, she is a woman, but ...”

The gender of someone already in their late 60s is not usually in doubt – except, apparently, in the case of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the newly elected president of Liberia.³⁹

and

I have read numerous commentaries on Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s victory in the Liberian

Sirleaf's need to draw the support of women at home and abroad relied finally on a rather essentializing brand of femininity:

Johnson-Sirleaf was quoted as saying during her campaign, "Women are the ones who truly have heart to care and to serve, perhaps because of the role that nature has bestowed on us. A woman is naturally crafted to take care of the children and keep the home together, and our constitution is patterned toward selfless service."⁴²

These are no feminist sentiments, but must be understood as strategically constructed positions by which women's support in Liberia and elsewhere could be enlisted without the threat of supporters being seen as unfeminine, feminist, or worse.

Johnson-Sirleaf acknowledges this herself: “Gender played an important role because my appeal

There are three interconnected ways in which the Liberian Diaspora now has, if not a determinant effect on the outcome of an election, enough power to seriously sway the electorate

members of the global Diaspora to their home countries is estimated at \$300 billion or more. This makes the global Diaspora a major emerging alternative funding source for Third World development.⁵⁴

While this indicates the importance of Diaspora generally, it is especially important in Liberia, given its infrastructural damage after 14 years of civil war and outright plundering by Taylor:

The Diaspora is a major source of investment funding, expertise and an important confidence building measure. Financial flows from the global African Diaspora contribute on the average of 5-10% GDP of many African countries and in a few cases over 20%. For example, shares of GDP from remittances for Guinea-Bissau, Eritrea, and Liberia are 48%, 38%, and 26%, respectively. This factor is significant especially for a country such as Liberia. Remittances accounting for 26% of Liberia's annual GDP of \$574.5 million and a growth rate of 7.9% translate into an inward capital flow of about \$149 million per annum. This only accounts for the formal sector. With the informal sector, the estimated total remittance flow to Liberia is \$300 million or more.⁵⁵

Giuliano and Ruiz-Arranz have developed an empirical analysis that shows how remittances can promote growth in less financially developed countries.⁵⁶ So if between the often increased educations and financial capital of those sending money home, whether to families, NGOs, or in campaign contributions, there is little doubt that this activity will have effects on voter behaviour. Johnson-Sirleaf's opponent, George Weah, was certainly a star of sorts in his own country, but Johnson-Sirleaf would no doubt appeal more to the Liberian Diaspora, first for the fact that she could more honestly represent their own interests in Liberia, having been a Diaspora member herself for many years, and furthermore for her extensive economic experience and expertise. But financial remittances are not the only kind; social remittances⁵⁷ have significant impact on those at home, according to Levitt, who states that although social remittances are often

⁵⁴ Barnes and Yalartai (2007) *Engaging the Liberian Diaspora: Mobilization of Domestic Resources and Partnership Building for Development*

An Alternative Development Model Retrieved on 01/02/09 from <http://www.phoenixamericapital.com/files/pdf.pdf>. p 1, 2

⁵⁵ Ibid p 6

⁵⁶ Giuliano and Ruiz-Arranz (2006) 'Remittances, Financial Development, and Growth' IMF Working Paper No. 05/234; IZA Discussion Paper No. 2160. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=888103>

⁵⁷ "...the ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital" that flow between populations at home and abroad. Levitt (1998) 'Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-level Forms of Cultural Diffusion' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Vol. 32, No. 4 p 927

“unsystematic and unintentional,”⁵⁸ they nonetheless typically “engender demands for a different type of politics.”⁵⁹

Global Networks and Participation

However powerful or powerless Diasporas existed before the Internet, the advent of global communications platforms has created a potent tool by which Diasporas influence their home countries. The Liberian Diaspora’s US-based online forum, *The Perspective*, provides a rich source of material for understanding the commitment and capacity of Diasporas to both see

Contributors to The Perspective include Dr. Chinua Akukwe,⁶¹ a member of the US Liberian Diaspora, who argues that

Liberians in the Diaspora should become strategic partners in Government's individual and private sector initiative to accelerate development. As one of the most distinguished African immigrants in the West in the last two decades, the president knows a thing or two about the strengths of her compatriots in the Diaspora. Creating opportunities for Liberians in the Diaspora to complete individual projects, safeguard personal investments in the country, create private sector generating jobs and bring major corporations to Liberia to set up factories and service delivery facilities should be an important focus of the new government. The key is to create conducive environments for Liberians in the Diaspora to maximize their potential in the urgent task of nation building.⁶²

One of the biggest current debates among Liberians at home and abroad has to do with the matter of dual citizenship. In the same interview as above, Johnson-Sirleaf said that:

To all of our disappointment, they [the Liberian Diaspora] have not been allowed to vote, simply because the Election Commission didn't feel they had the capacity to manage a vote externally. But many went home to register, and many will try to go home to vote. Many of them that cannot vote are working in support of candidates. I know that I'm enjoying support from Liberians in this country and in other countries to ensure that we win.

Arguments rage back and forth on the matter of dual citizenship in *The Perspective* in particular, and are of an intensity that bespeaks the passion exiles and expatriates of Liberia retain for the country of origin. But most persuasive on the matter of why Liberia needs to emend its constitution in favour of dual citizenship is the fact that a free flow of skilled, professional, academic, legal and medical expertise through the country, its infrastructure can only benefit.⁶⁴ As well, Diasporas from Liberia who have experienced the advantages of life in a more stabilized, less corrupt democracy, wherever that may be, are more likely to push for greater governmental transparency, fairness, and populism.

Conclusion

With Barack Obama's presidential victory in 2008, much of the world was overjoyed to see not only a black American elected president, but one whose intelligence evokes a time when education and intelligence were thought basic prerequisites for holding high office. There are parallels in these firsts, a woman president of Africa's oldest republic in 2006 and a black president of the US in 2008, at least in one important respect. Obama and Johnson-Sirleaf each embody the erstwhile contradiction of being visible minorities (black and a woman, respectively) chosen by a majority to lead their respective democratic nations in the context of globalization, where 'citizenship' has become increasingly porous and protean. Obama's cosmopolitan

⁶⁴ "Professionals and highly qualified individuals such as doctors, nurses, engineers, accountants and all those whose services are indispensable for the process of reconstruction in the native countries may be reluctant to return home since as temporary workers they lack security of work in their host countries. In this case, too, the potential contribution of these highly skilled migrants to their home countries is lost. As globalisation creates virtual borders, serious thought has to be given to the question of dual citizenship to enable these previously war and coup-ravaged countries to maximise benefits from international migration." Akokpari & Azevedo (2007) 'Post-Conflict Elections in Liberia and Guinea Bissau' ;Vol. 10, Nos. 1&2, 2007, p 89

background (which includes residency or genealogy in Hawaii, Kenya, Kansas, and Indonesia) is interesting, but Johnson-Sirleaf's 'cultural' genealogy, and in particular, her experience as a member of Liberia's considerable Diaspora point directly to paradigm shift attending globalization. Understanding the importance of Johnson-Sirleaf's trajectory requires a re-conceptualization of past notions and assumptions about citizenship, and a recognition of the importance of a Diaspora's real and potential effects on democratic and economic development. Failing awareness of these conditions, we would remain baffled by the fact that a Harvard-educated divorced grandmother, twice imprisoned, briefly an ally of the infamous Liberian warlord Charles Taylor and long-time resident of the US, was freely and fairly elected president of Liberia. More intriguing than this is the possibility that Liberia's president was chosen in part because she was *of* a Diaspora, and in part by virtue of the strength of Diasporic influence on the election.

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