

PRESIDENT ELLEN JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: REBUILDING A NATION

On January 16, 2006, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was sworn in as President of Liberia; the first woman to be elected head of an African state. Born and educated in Monrovia, she continued her studies in the U.S. in the 1960s, obtaining her Master's degree from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. On Monday, September 18, 2006 President Johnson-Sirleaf discussed her strategy for rebuilding Liberia at the Kennedy School's Institute of Politics. There are several contributors to these questions, recognized accordingly.

Africa Policy Journal (APJ)¹: It appears that peace and security are your top priorities. What are you offering the former warlords as an incentive to resettle and be productive citizens?

President Johnson-Sirleaf: Above all, the opportunities to go back to school and to go into their communities to have important jobs: hopefully, some in the private sector and some in local government. Also, to enable them to have training opportunities so they can have an income and support themselves. I take this from the fact that during the campaign I went into their groups and asked, "What do you want? What should the government do for you?" Very clearly the answer was, "an education." I believe responding to that demand and need is the best way to go.

APJ²: What diplomatic pressures have you faced from the West and from the old generation of African leaders, especially as it relates to the extradition of the former President Charles Taylor?

President Johnson-Sirleaf: Let's say, as far as the West is concerned, I think the action and the developments on the Taylor score probably met their requirements and their desires. We have had some positive feedback although we don't use that as the basis for our diplomatic and international relations.

¹ **Kobina Aidoo** is Co-chief Editor of the Africa Policy Journal. He is pursuing a Master of Public Policy degree at the Kennedy School of Government, with a concentration in International Trade and Finance. He is a citizen of Ghana.

² **Proud Dzambukira** is a citizen of Zimbabwe and a senior at Harvard College, majoring in Economics. His interest is in political economy.

Yes, on the African scene, there is some uneasiness with the African leadership. Not the African people but the African leadership. There is uneasiness because this is an unprecedented move in which a sitting president gets indicted and gets arrested. And so it's like, "Uh! Who's next?" I do have good relationships with many African leaders due to my years of serving in the U.N. and the personal relationships that have developed. They are reluctantly giving me the benefit of the doubt by saying "Let's see how this works out." Fortunately, generally, there's that resigned acceptance, and it is largely based on the fact that in Liberia itself the majority of the people have accepted it. There's no doubt there are pockets of discontent and rebellion by loyalists but the majority of the people have accepted this as the way to reclaim the future.

APJ³: What types of initiatives are you all pursuing to not only include and attract foreign investment but also to enable individuals who are from Liberia to become involved in those types of trades?

President Johnson-Sirleaf: Just as an example, in the forestry sector, we set aside a certain sized concession in the new forestry law that gives preference to Liberians in terms of the right of first use and the right of first ownership. Obviously, if they are not in the position to do it, then we want to give it to others. Many of these are capital-intensive businesses and the reality is that many Liberians don't have that kind of capital.

Also, we want to use "preference" with a bit of caution because we want to make our people competitive. In some sense, we may be creating disincentives to others so we try to encourage joint ventures. We can look at good examples in Ghana. Ghana has done well to support an indigenous entrepreneurship. The measures you use could send a powerful message of disincentive outside. You don't want to do that because that would limit your potential to exploit the resources. Right now we need to get that investment going but we also try to encourage Liberians. We have to expose them to our banking system to enable them to get capital, encourage them to make subsidiary arrangements in collaboration with foreign partners and hope that over time they will be strong enough to be competitive.

³ **Natasha Hamilton** is pursuing a Master of Public Policy degree at the Kennedy School of Government. She is primarily interested in municipal finance and urban redevelopment.

APJ⁴: How do you balance the need for jobs with the need for keeping the wealth within your country in order to not fall back into growth without development, so that the jobs and the wealth that the foreign firms are creating stay within the country and do not go to Europe or America or elsewhere?

President Johnson-Sirleaf: The creation of jobs starts with investment—specifically, private sector investment in our extractive industries, in our agriculture and in the potential for agro-based industries. Some of our products are just rubber but value-added is key. That’s what creates the jobs. To do that, it is essential to create the environment to attract the private capital and investment to create those jobs.

How do we insure that there’s no exploitation? We make sure that the kinds of agreements that we give, under which the foreign investors will work, insure that the national interest is protected. This could be in terms of requiring specific objectives for job creation or requiring the use of Liberian talent and skills wherever they are competitive and wherever they exist.

We are also reviewing all of the concession agreements of the past for the very reason that we didn’t think they were advantageous to the country. In my first week in office I cancelled about 80 forestry concession agreements because they didn’t pass the national interest test. We have new laws and new regulations to insure the national interest, particularly for communities in which the exploitation of the assets in those areas creates certain additional returns for the area. Whether it’s in terms of infrastructure or in terms of participation in some of the activities as jobs for the people, we are insuring that this happens.

APJ⁵: You have said that one of your goals is to make the civil service more efficient. There may be many redundant civil servants but often people with salaries in the formal sector support a large network of family and friends so how do you plan to implement this initiative?

⁴ **Oludamini Ogunnaike** is a senior at Harvard College, majoring in Cognitive Neuroscience and Africana Studies.

⁵ **Karolina Dryjanska** is a Master of Public Policy candidate at the Kennedy School of Government, concentrating in Human Resources, Labor and Education.

President Johnson-Sirleaf: At first we had thought that we would be radical and just go in and say “boom.” That didn’t prove possible because the backlash was just too much, given the unemployment. Now we are trying to do it in stages and see if that can be dovetailed into some of the private sector activities like concession agreements that we’re now negotiating because that will be the main step to shore up those that we lay off. So it may now take us two years. At first we thought we were going to do it in six months but that is not possible.

APJ⁶: **There are many well-educated and experienced Africans living in developed countries who try to go back home and help develop their countries but end up getting frustrated. One such frustration is that those living and working in Africa may feel threatened by the returnees. As president, what can you do to address this problem?**

President Johnson-Sirleaf: Yes, there is some tension between those who are in the Diaspora who want to go back and others who feel that, “Oh, you’ve lived the comfortable and good life and now you want to come back and you want to be president and you want to get all the good benefits and to bring you back we may have to attract you with special incentives and all of that.” There is some resistance to that by those at home but, over time, that tension is manageable. We may have to make some extraordinary arrangements because competent Africans in the Diaspora probably have their families overseas and it may take a while to uproot their families and take them back. The key is going to be your ability to integrate, your ability to assimilate, your ability to get along with the people and not to have an arrogant stand, as if you are condescending and you are special. So you have to be one of them and then to make a difference in your professional competence and in your contribution. If you do that, like some have done, then you find that this tension dissipates.

APJ⁷: **What are you doing about healthcare to bring it, at least, to pre-1980s level, and what roles can international partners play?**

President Johnson-Sirleaf: The healthcare system, like everything else is totally destroyed. If I remember the numbers correctly, in early 1980, at time of the coup, we had 364 doctors—

⁶ **Ouborr Kutando** is a citizen of Ghana pursuing a Master of Public Policy degree at the Kennedy School of Government. His concentration is in Political and Economic Development.

⁷ **Sando Baysah** is a Liberian and a pre-med student of Harvard College

Liberian—practicing throughout the country. That number is now in the 30s. They are in the United States. They are in Europe. They are in other places. Most of the hospitals were destroyed, the equipment and the furniture looted.

Right now we are just trying to rebuild, trying to restore the fiscal infrastructures before we can talk about getting them equipped and trying to get doctors. The Chinese and others, including Nigeria, are giving us some doctors that are doing work there. We are trying to rehabilitate the JFK Hospital, which is our major referral hospital that was destroyed but it is now back. We have been able to attract a couple of Liberians back to come in and take over.

We still don't have important medical services available. For example, if somebody has a kidney problem, we don't have dialysis services right now. We hope we can get that at the end of the year. For now, if somebody had that kind of a problem, they would have to go to Ghana to be treated. It will take us a while but we will get to providing important medical services.

APJ⁸: where do you want to see Liberia ten years from now?

President Johnson-Sirleaf: Ten years from now my hope is that we would have achieved our objective of universal, free primary education. First and foremost, we need to get the young children into school. I also envision the youth in training programs with job possibilities and post-training for them. We hope we would have relocated our major university. We want to decentralize it so that people can make it a system instead of just a free-standing institution in the capital city. We want people to be able to attend throughout our rural areas, even if it is just sub-regional based.

I hope our unemployment rate, now 80 percent, will be brought down to 50 percent or somewhere around 40 percent. It may take us a while to get it down into single digits so we don't want to be overly ambitious. I hope we will get most of our industries functioning again and that our displaced population will be back into their communities and villages. We hope we will have an economy generating sufficient income.

⁸ **Belay Ejigu** is the former Minister of State for Agriculture and Rural Development of Ethiopia and currently a Mason Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government.

We hope that we would have tackled poverty. We are not going to meet the millennium goal by 2015 but we hope we would have reduced poverty substantially. We hope we are going to have a system where political maturity would have taken place. We would have had a second election within ten years. My own tenure will come to an end in six years and we would have another successful democratically-elected president who will consolidate the democratic process and the openness.

All of these are now being put together in terms of quantifiable targets. We don't have them all concluded yet. More important, we hope by that time peace and stability will reign and that all of the dissenting forces would have joined the processes of reconstruction and development. We can start to create an environment that will not only bring more investors but repatriate most of the Liberians home to improve our national capacity.