



THE POWER OF THE DIASPORA:

A TEACHING CASE ON

ELLEN JOHNSON-SIRLEAF'S 2005 PRESIDENTIAL
VICTORY IN LIBERIA

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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 behind to return to a country where 'political party,' 'armed militia,' and 'murderous gang' were, a short time ago, synonymous? Further, does one aim to take on perhaps the most difficult job imaginable, president of a devastated Liberia?

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf no doubt struggled with this decision in 2004 when, as a member of the Liberian Diaspora only recently returned from the US, she contemplated running for the Liberian presidency. She'd run in Liberia, in 1997, and lost against a landslide of votes for Charles Taylor, whose win can be largely attributed to intimidation.² Although the UN and US military intervened in the civil war that erupted anew during Taylor's regime and exiled Taylor to Nigeria, there were still an overwhelming number of factors to quash Johnson-Sirleaf's

¹ Pajibo (2007) 'Civil Society and Transitional Justice in Liberia: A Practitioner's Reflection from the Field' *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 1, p 288

² Moran (2006) Liberia p 106

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:

Slave-owners saw repatriation as a means of removing unwelcome examples of independent, self-supporting free blacks from the view of their slaves. Some white abolitionists were nevertheless uncomfortable with the prospect of actually living in a multiracial society. Evangelical Christians envisioned a divine plan to ‘redeem’ African heathens through the example of black missionaries and Christian communities. American merchants... welcomed a secure landing place on the African coast [for]...the emerging ‘legitimate trade’ in palm oil, coffee [etc].⁹

⁷ Moran (2006) *Liberia* p 2

⁸ Mgbeoji (2003) *Collective insecurity: the Liberian crisis, unilateralism, and the global order* p 2

⁹ Moran (2006) *Liberia* p 2

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 this group had been in the US, to adopt a colonizing position themselves if a suitable context for doing so arises.¹⁰ Sawyer describes Liberia's early leaders as facing choice between outright control and subordination of the many indigenous communities in the pre-Liberian region, versus "the extension of prerogatives of citizenship"¹¹ to these disparate indigenous communities:

For half a century this question was at the core of the debate about the mission and vision of Liberia...Most settler-leaders struggled to implement a third option, which was to establish relationships of tutelage with surrounding indigenous communities with the view to gradually incorporating individuals from those communities into the Liberian body politic, as such individuals from those communities would have been seen to have acquired the qualities to be considered "civilized."¹²

In President William V.S. Tubman's mid-20th century reign, universal suffrage and education increased, and with these came increasing expectations of greater democracy. As noted by Sayle and Sua,¹³ the experience of such development quickly exceeded the nation's capacity to deliver, (a case of 'the theory of relative deprivation') and under President Tolbert's heavy-handed rule, indigenous Liberians and their in-country allies eventually resorted to violence in their quest for greater democracy and economic fairness. Tolbert was killed in a coup orchestrated by the indigenous warlord Samuel Doe, which saw "some of the worst human rights atrocities in Africa

¹⁰ A cultural phenomenon identified by Stalleybrass and White in 1986, known as "displaced abjection", wherein a 'low' social group turns what literal or figurative power it may achieve not against the dominant group, but against 'lower' groups. Liberia's history appears to be a textbook of displaced abjection; the phenomenon is noted by Mgbefji.

¹¹ Sawyer (2005) *Beyond Plunder* p 14

¹² Ibid

¹³ Sayle and Sua (2008) *Creating an International Network of Democracy Builders*, Vol. 2, p 12

during the 1980s¹⁴ 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 by some as indicative of IECOM bias. Allegations were made that counts of zero were registered for both Boley and George Toe Washington at the very polling stations in which they had cast their own votes (Daily Observer, 28 July 1997), and the UP claimed that party representatives had been under duress to sign the tally sheets at the polling stations (The Inquirer, 23 July 1997).¹⁹

It is telling that Johnson-Sirleaf and her party went on record with their protests, given that she had been already been imprisoned once, by Doe, for announcing her intention to run against him. And again, she was charged with treason in 1997 by Taylor's government, and went into exile. She returned in 2003 after Taylor had been removed, to chair the *Commission on Good Governance*, which had been mandated to assist and monitor the preparation for the next elections.

The 2005 Election

Liberia was governed under the principles of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) since October 2003. The CPA established the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTOG) to implement its provisions and lay the groundwork for a return to democracy. In February 2005, the National Elections Commission announced that October 11, 2005, would be the date for the election, and that if a run-off was necessary, this would be held on November 5, 2005. The House of Representatives of the new legislature would have 64 seats (each of Liberia's 15 counties has at least two seats with the remaining 34 apportioned by population), while the senate was to have 30 seats, two for each County, with both representatives and senators directly elected. The Presidency would be decided by a majority of the popular vote. If no one succeeded in obtaining over 50% of the votes on the first ballot, a run-off would be held between the two leading candidates.

The Carter Centre of the National Democracy Institute, which observed the two elections, concluded in a post-election report that

¹⁹ Ibid

[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 as President of Liberia on January 16, 2006.

David Harris cautions, however, that Liberia’s election should not necessarily be seen as a typical post-conflict election, and that its utility as an example for democratizations elsewhere is limited in the absence of similar circumstances. In particular, Harris notes that

[t]he absence of transformed rebel forces in the political process was just as unusual a factor in the conduct and outcome of the elections as the lack of an incumbent. This was, to all intents and purposes, an election amongst civilians on a playing field, if not level, at least not dramatically tilted. The elections thus, from the perspective of insecurity and its electoral uses, resembled African peacetime polls more than other post-conflict elections. From another perspective, the Liberian polls resembled few other African elections in peace or after war, in that there was no incumbent party with vastly superior resources at its disposal. These features impacted positively on the conduct of the elections, even enabling a final scenario involving a woman and a footballer...²⁴

²³ Harris (2006) p 388-391

²⁴ Ibid p 393

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’ *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 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, which poses an interesting complication in the case of Johnson-Sirleaf’s 2005 victory. Given that the majority of Liberia’s population is anything but middle class, it could be argued that Johnson-Sirleaf’s victory was less than democratic, according to the Perlin taxonomy. But we will be looking at the role played by the Diaspora in that victory, whose lives are likely to be, relative to their fellow citizens at home, more middle class. Without data to support this supposition, we cannot say definitively that Liberia has an active middle class *in absentia*, but if this is true, the election of Johnson-Sirleaf may indeed have occurred within Perlin’s facilitating condition of a middle class; we know that Diasporas have considerable influence on the countries they adopt, but what is less understood thus far is the likelihood that Diasporan influence may be profound in the home country as well.

Citizenship and Representation

The final element in Perlin’s taxonomy of democratic operating principles is that there be “A system of group politics that ensures the representation of citizen interests based on the principles of pluralist theory.” One of the indicators of this element is recognition by government and policy makers of the legitimacy of advocacy, and that there be free space for advocacy groups. This element takes on interesting proportions in relation to the notion of a Diasporic citizenship. Citizenship refers to “a legally recognized subject or national of a state or commonwealth, either *native or naturalized*”³² which implies residency as criteria of citizenship. But in an increasingly globalized world, ‘citizenship’ is complicated by the value of fluid mobility of goods, services, and people. The nation-state itself has been under critical scrutiny for some time: “The projected demise of the nation-state has been a central aspect of many

³¹ Lyons (1999) *Voting for Peace: Postconflict Elections in Liberia* p 59. Perversely, Lyons defends this election on a number of fronts, the most logically egregious of which is that “Taylor [was] perceived as the candidate most capable of preventing a return to war.” This is akin to suggesting that I am the best of all neighbors because when I finish banging my neighbor’s head against the fence, he seems to feel great.

³² New Oxford American Dictionary, my emphasis

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 origins are themselves both recent and artificial, in a historical sense. Ergo, its citizenship is in some ways artificial. But this notion is unacceptable in terms of current governance, and too abstract to be of any value. Or is it?

If Liberia’s constitution is that of an initially small, foreign, degraded body (accepting that returning slaves become foreign to their ancestral homes) imposing its will upon a regional collective of communities historically unfamiliar and evidently uninterested in becoming units of a whole, then it can be argued that it has *always been* an essentially ‘citizen-less’ state. Perhaps it is this particular kind of liminal identity that permeates the Liberian ethos. The utterly human compulsion to literally or figuratively locate and affix ‘home,’ beyond dwelling, drives us to identify ourselves through place. It has surely been the Liberian experience from its origins to struggle with this urge, on the part of its settlers, those unsettled, and ultimately, by its Diaspora. The old question of ‘who’ is Liberian takes on new significance in a modern context. At one time, the answer was an ugly one; ‘Liberians’ were lighter-skinned American transplants. Now, the Liberian citizen may well be, as are an increasing number of citizens, geographically globalized. In this sense, the Liberian Diaspora should be no less fully entitled to full participation in the political matters of their country of birth or ancestry.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’s lifelong commitment to seeing democracy in Liberia is not unique among the country’s Diaspora, which has been actively engaged in the matter of its own participation in Liberia’s development for many years. The question of why Johnson-Sirleaf would choose to run as president, if framed by questions of ambition or psychology, is one only she could answer.³⁴ She does offer a brief response to this question in an interview:

I want to change the country. We have a small country with ample resources and a small population, and we remain undeveloped compared with so many African countries. The potential is so large. Good leadership can make Liberia a model country, both in terms of

³³ Bhambra (2006) ‘Beginnings: Edward Said and Questions of Nationalism’ *interventions*, Vol. 8 (1) p 3

³⁴ Retrieved on 01/02/09 from <http://allafrica.com/stories/200508100001.html>

development and democracy. We need to come out of these elections with a good leader who has the capacity and the experience to lead the team that overtakes the processes of reconciliation and development.

But if framed as a matter of right, meaning her right as a member of the country's Diaspora to undertake such a role, the question is somewhat moot if we accept all the evidence³⁵ that Diasporas do not often, in the most meaningful sense, ever 'leave' their home countries. That she can truly be understood to represent her nation's peoples is without doubt, despite having parted company from them for a good many years. In fact, the mix of longstanding and deep patriotism with years of highly cosmopolitan experience, her native and Americo-Liberian ancestry, the contradiction of close familiarity with previous regimes and brutal treatment from them, all make her an exceptionally appropriate representative. In a 2006 speech to the U.S. Congress, Johnson-Sirleaf emphasized this relationship when she stated that

I came face to face with the human devastation of war, which killed a quarter of a million of our three million people and displaced most of the rest. Hundreds of thousands escaped across borders. More - who could not - fled into the bush, constantly running from one militia or another, often surviving by eating rodents and wild plants that made them sick and even killed them. Our precious children died of malaria, parasites and malnourishments. Our boys, full of potential, were forced to be child soldiers, to kill or be killed. Our girls, capable of being anything they could imagine, were made into sex slaves, gang-raped by men with guns, made mothers while they were still children themselves.

But listening to the hopes and dreams of our people, I recall the words of a Mozambican poet who said, "Our dream has the size of freedom." My people, like your people, believe deeply in freedom - and, in their dreams, they reach for the heavens. I represent those dreams. I represent their hope and their aspirations. I ran for president because I am determined to see good governance in Liberia in my lifetime. But I also ran because I am the mother of four, and I wanted to see our children smile again.³⁶

³⁵ Diasporas are typically primary knowledge sources of their cultures in their adopted countries; the most striking examples of this are found in Holocaust memoirs (Elie Weisel,) literature (I.B. Singer,) and philosophy (Hannah Arendt.) More recently, Rohinton Mistry's literary masterpieces, written in Canada about India, indicate the Diasporic capacity to carry one's past geography into a present one.

³⁶ Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Speech to a U.S. Joint Session of Congress, 15 March 2006 available from http://www.embassyofliberia.org/news/item_congressspeech.html.

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 win the election is only part of the answer. A review of her speeches, strategies, organization, and bases of support internally provides a clear picture of knowledge, experience, determination and credibility.³⁷ Ultimately, our focus is on what role the Liberian Diaspora, in the context of globalization, played in her success, but there is also the matter of gender, which played a not insignificant part in her success.

Gender

In the same way that citizenship in Liberia is complicated by legacy and now globalization, so is gender. Sirleaf's status as a woman is alternately glorified and refuted in the media, and she herself alternately points to or away from it, depending on rhetorical purpose. Consider the media excerpts below:

“Ellen is our man!” was the refrain that rang through the streets of Monrovia during Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's campaign to be Africa's first elected woman president. Despite the slogan, many of Johnson Sirleaf's supporters attribute her victory to the fact that she is not a man. Liberians often blame men for destroying the country and many see Johnson Sirleaf as the woman who will set things right. Johnson Sirleaf herself has vowed to bring “motherly sensitivity and emotion to the presidency.”³⁸

and

Stella Tamale, dean of law at Makerere University in Uganda, is equally pleased: “No one can tell us any more that Africa is not ready for a woman president,” she says.

³⁷ See articles describing the Johnson-Sirleaf campaign at *The Free Library* (<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Liberia%3a+a+new+beginning%3b+After+158+years+of+%22imperial%22+male+rule%2c...-a0142575258>), the *All Africa* site (<http://allafrica.com/stories/200512110034.html>) at *PBS.org* (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/africa/liberia/johnson-sirleaf-bio.html>) at *KRL International* (<http://www.krlinternational.com/press/121405.html>) and *CBS* (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/liberia/sirleaf.html>).

³⁸ Retrieved on 12/30/08 from http://www.huntalternatives.org/pages/399_ellen_johnson_sirleaf.cfm

“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 Presidential elections. Many have dubbed her “A Woman of Substance.” Others call her the “Iron Lady”. Yet others portray her as the one beacon of hope in “the worst place to be a woman on earth.” A campaign slogan in Monrovia is reported to have read: “Ellen, She’s Our Man”; another urged people to “Vote for the Old Ma”– a sign of deference and respect for the elder status and consequent wisdom Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is assumed to have garnered over the years. Having won the most votes in Liberia’s run-off election for President, Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson stands on the threshold of becoming the first woman head of state in Africa. She has turned the tide of male-dominated control over the commanding heights of African politics, opening up the possibility that the 21st Century is the century of the African woman in politics.⁴⁰

The calculated strategy of fostering an image in which one is a ‘man,’ but not a man, and a woman, but not a ‘woman,’ is hundreds of years old. It is a trope first known to be employed by Queen Elizabeth I, who claimed “I have the heart of a man, not a woman, and I am not afraid of anything” in a speech to her army at Tilbury in 1588.⁴¹ In the same speech, she argued

I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king-and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn . . . that . . . any should dare to invade the borders of my realm . . . I myself will be your general.

A great deal of attention was paid, during the Johnson-Sirleaf campaign and since, to the fact that Johnson-Sirleaf is a woman. This should be construed as a bit archaic, given that little interest is evident in the media to the sex or gender of male leaders. It is not necessary to know what Johnson-Sirleaf’s personal views on feminism or the rights of women to power might be; these would be personal, but it is noteworthy that in the 21st century, the matter is still an issue, and that the strategy of calculated ambiguity is still apparently necessary. But it seems that Johnson-

³⁹ Retrieved on 12/30/08 from http://www.howardwrench.com/archives/2005/11/15/ellen_johnsonsirleaf_less_of_the_iron_lady/

⁴⁰ Okome, Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké (2005) ‘Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson (sic): A Tribute’ *JENDA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* Issue 7

⁴¹ Retrieved on 12/30/08 from http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/elizabeth_tilbury.htm

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.

There is somewhat exceptional justification for Johnson-Sirleaf to play the gender card, however she chose to play it. In a study on presidential power, regime type, and democracy in 30 African countries, Van Cranenberg⁴³ points to the democracy-withering effects of highly centralized governments in Africa, referring to these as 'Big Men Rule.' (Sayle and Sua note that Liberia's constitutional office is "head of an extremely centralized government structure."⁴⁴) Johnson-Sirleaf had already lost one presidential election in her lifetime, to voters who quite reasonably chose their own safety and security in choosing Taylor, knowing that his defeat would no doubt mean continued bloodshed. Playing the gender card in 2005, she quite shrewdly worked the broader threat of masculinity itself as a reason to vote for her. This is the subtext of the presentation of gender in her campaign and in her presidency:

Gender representation across the continent is heavily stacked in favour of men, and although the causes of Africa's problems are many, the track record of the "Big Men" has been questionable to say the least. At the beginning of a new century, perhaps the time of the African woman has finally come.⁴⁵

⁴² Retrieved on 12/31/08 from http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=93c365f944b7adecb0410351c5890bd6

⁴³ Van Cranenberg (2008) 'Big Men' Rule: Presidential Power, Regime Type, and Democracy in 30 African Countries' *Democratization* Vol. 15, No. 5

⁴⁴ Sayle and Sua (2008) *Creating an International Network of Democracy Builders*, Vol. 2, p 48

⁴⁵ Retrieved on 12/31/08 from [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Liberia%3a+a+lesson+for+Africa's+big+men.\(Around+Africa\)-a0140071324](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Liberia%3a+a+lesson+for+Africa's+big+men.(Around+Africa)-a0140071324)

Johnson-Sirleaf acknowledges this herself: “Gender played an important role because my appeal went to grassroots people – women marketers, women traders – and they really mobilized on my behalf.”⁴⁶

Liberia’s Diaspora and Globalization

Liberia’s relationship with its Diaspora was, in the first part of the 20th century, complicated first by the government’s interest in drawing Black Americans and Black Caribbeans wishing to ‘return’ to Africa, followed quickly by governmental reluctance and then outright rejection of Black Americans in particular after the Marcus Garvey affair. Garvey’s intent to “liberate Africa from European rule” and to transfer 20,000 to 30,000 Black families a year was ultimately seen as a troublesome prospect that could threaten Liberia’s elites.⁴⁷ But this chapter in the country’s history refers more to migrants than an actual Diaspora, although Sawyer defines Garveyites as a Diaspora.

There remains much debate over what exactly defines a Diaspora, but if theories of postmodernism have anything to teach us, it is that the whole is not more, but *different* than the sum of its parts; thus the more global citizen, including members of a Diaspora, are often reluctant to define themselves as mere amalgams of two or more identities, as, for instance, an *Americo-Liberian* or an *Indo-Canadian*. Instead, Diaspora are often defined or self-defined as beyond the binary. Walsh suggests that Diasporas generally are “repositioning themselves in relation to postcolonial and neocolonial regimes and in relation to a nation-state-dominated global order” and argues that this positioning creates collective potential to ally politically in with a home country from abroad.⁴⁸ However defined, there is little doubt that they wield extraordinary clout.

Although each of the leading candidates in the presidential race received backing from U.S.-based support groups, Sirleaf’s supporters were among the most active. A group called “Family, Friends and Well-Wishers of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf” raised funds,

⁴⁶ Roehrkasse (Dec. 10 2008) ‘Interview with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf’ *The Brown Daily Herald*

⁴⁷ Sundiata (1980) *Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labour Crisis, 1929-1936* Philadelphia: ISHI p 112

⁴⁸ Walsh (2003) *Global Diasporas interventions* Vol. 5(1), p 4, 8

organized rallies, and, last week after her victory became official, held a thanksgiving service in Washington, DC.

Johnson-Sirleaf took care to engage with Diaspora groups throughout the US in her campaign, particularly with the sizeable Liberian Diaspora in Minnesota.

What Do Out-of-Country Liberians Matter to an Election?

The year before campaigning was allowed within Liberia, a group called ‘Liberians for Ellen’ established a website to mobilize support for her from the US. The group was spearheaded by Amara Konneh, a member of the Liberian Diaspora who became an information specialist, and who studied James Carville and Karl Rove to help orchestrate a US-based Johnson-Sirleaf campaign. This work was instrumental in her victory, as Konneh worked with ongoing polling data and political consultants in the US to shape and redefine Johnson-Sirleaf’s message in accordance with his group’s data. In fact, the networking undertaken by the Liberian Diaspora in the US in particular included Larry Gibson, who “managed the 1992 Clinton/Gore campaign in Maryland and three successful campaigns for Baltimore’s first black mayor.”⁴⁹ Johnson-Sirleaf’s own connectivity in her period as a member of Liberia’s Diaspora brought her to, among other key figures, Jesse Jackson, who “was instrumental in obtaining \$50 million in US federal aid for Liberia.”⁵⁰ Further, Richard Tolbert, the son of Liberia’s former president and a Wall Street-based international banker “supported Sirleaf’s candidacy and joined her on her West African tour.” He stated that “Sirleaf’s victory has elicited tremendous goodwill from around the world. ‘We saw it everywhere we went.’ he said.”⁵¹ These are fairly concrete instances of Diasporic activity, including Johnson-Sirleaf’s, in which the direct impact of such activity can be seen. But there are broader, more phenomenally entrenched factors associated with the Liberian Diaspora that testify their role in Johnson-Sirleaf’s victory.

⁴⁹ Kramer (2005) ‘Liberia: Showered with Enthusiasm, Liberia’s President-Elect Receives High-Level Reception in Washington’ *All-Africa.com*. Retrieved on 12/31/08.

⁵⁰ Dukule (May 2006) ‘The War is Over – But We Must Remain Vigilant,’ says President Sirleaf to Liberians in Chicago, Illinois *The Perspective* Retrieved on 01/01/09 from www.theperspective.org

⁵¹ Retrieved on 01/02/09 from <http://allafrica.com/stories/200512110034.html?page=3>

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 back home. Financial remittances, influence within and the creation of global networks, and the development of a highly participatory ethos, amounting to patriotism, which permeates the Liberian Diaspora.

Remittance

Sawyer asserts that Liberia's Diaspora remits significant capital, "hundreds of thousands of dollars monthly in cash to relatives and causes in Liberia."⁵² In such a poverty-stricken nation, this activity has important influence on both lives and views in the home country. Further,

Almost all community-related organizations extant in Liberia have branch extensions or affiliated networks in the United States. There are scores of township, clan, district and county organizations; alumni associations, professional groups; and religious bodies organized to advance the welfare of their members in the United States and to support parent or related communities in Liberia. The Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas has seventeen chapters around the United States...An organization of Liberian physicians in the United States currently has a membership of more than 125 physicians and is currently planning to restore the standards of the medical school of the University of Liberia.⁵³

In the context of globalization Nathaniel Barnes, a permanent representative of the Mission of Liberia to the UN and Bennett M. Yalartai, a policy advisor to this same body, argue that the Diaspora takes on new significance, especially concerning their real and potential economic impact:

What is the Diaspora? Contrary to popular perception, the Diaspora is not just the latest buzzword for expatriate networks. The Diaspora is an emerging global economic and political phenomenon informally complementing Foreign Direct Investment with the potential of becoming a major influence, if not the new and true "North", in future North/South cooperation... The impact of remittances as a global economic force for developing countries over the last three decades is incredible. In 1980, the officially recorded remittance flows to developing countries equated to about \$15 billion; by 2002, flows had ballooned to \$80 billion. In 2007, the annual flow of remittances from

⁵² Sawyer (2005) *Beyond Plunder: Toward Democratic Governance in Liberia* London: Reinner Publishers p 78

⁵³ *Ibid*

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' *International Migration Review* 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 themselves as citizens of an adopted land and yet always Liberian enough to want influence an outcome halfway across the world from them. It also enables families, communities, and districts within the country to understand the role democracy plays in the lives of expatriates and exiles.

The Perspective is an online magazine that provides an active bilateral forum for Liberians and the Liberian Diaspora to publicly debate political, socio-cultural and economic issues together. It has been active since 1998, and draws material from Liberian intellectuals as well as the general Liberian or Liberian Diasporic public. *The Perspective* was founded by the Liberian Democratic Future (LDF) which is:

A group of Liberians from different ethnic backgrounds, genders, religious beliefs and political persuasions who are dedicated to pluralistic, democratic Liberia. The Liberian Democratic Future has great passion for democracy, peace with justice and equal opportunity for all Liberians, which are not only necessary but in deed critically imperative if we are to transcend the wounds and deep division of our civil conflict. In recognition of this national need, LDF has decided to launch a medium of dialogue - *The Perspective*.⁶⁰

There is no data available on its or other Liberian online forum readership, but the variety of contributors and themes, along with these sites’ relative longevity online, suggests that they are extremely popular. Networks include *AllAfrica*, *liberianonline.com*, *westafricadirectory.com*, *unitedliberia.com*, *liberiabroadcastingsystem.com*, *www.analystliberia.com*, and many more.

⁵⁸ Ibid p 936, 942

⁵⁹ Ibid p 942

⁶⁰ Retrieved on 12/31/08 from <http://www.theperspective.org/editorial.html>

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

These arguments indicate the growing recognition of the importance of the Diaspora now, but even before her election, Johnson-Sirleaf made it clear that she was thoroughly aware of their role. She was asked in an interview "What role do you see the Liberian Diaspora playing in the election?" and answered:

They're playing an important role already, even pre-election. Liberians abroad provide significant resources to the country – huge amounts to take care of their family and friends. In these elections, they are much more involved than they have been in other elections. They are enthusiastic, they are aggressive, they are participatory with the candidates or party of their choice, they are having rallies, they are supporting with ideas, with money.⁶³

⁶¹ "An expert on HIV/AIDS strategies, policies and programs, with special focus on Africa; global health; maternal and child health; and, international development partnerships. He is a Fellow of the American College of Epidemiology; a Fellow of the United Kingdom Royal Society of Medicine, London; a Fellow of the United States National Academy of Public Administration, Washington, DC; a Member of the New York Academy of Sciences; a former Vice Chairman of the Executive Committee and Governing Board of the National Council for International Health (NCIH) now known as the Global Health Council, Washington, DC; a former Senior Visiting Fellow at the National Medical Association, Washington, DC; a former Senior Visiting Fellow at the American Council for Voluntary International Action (InterAction), Washington, DC; a former member of the International Human Rights Committee of the American Public Health Association; a former member of the editorial board of the American Journal of Public Health, where he served for five years; and, a former member of the board of directors of the Christian Connections for International Health, an international ecumenical organization. Dr. Akukwe is presently a member of the Board of Directors of the Constituency for Africa, Washington, DC. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of Physicians and Scientists of African Descent (ASPAD), Silver Spring, Maryland, USA." Retrieved on 01/01/09 from <http://www.worldpress.org/freelancers/index.cfm/hurl/page=freelancerDetails/id=41>

⁶² Retrieved on 01/01/09 from <http://www.theperspective.org/articles/0119200602.html>

⁶³ Retrieved on 01/02/09 from <http://allafrica.com/stories/200508100001.html>

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 amend 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' *African Journal of International Affairs*, 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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