

ELLEN SIRLEAF-JOHNSON: A TRIBUTE

Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome

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. Indeed, this is a victory to be celebrated. As an African woman, I am proud of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf for her accomplishments and achievements. Her electoral victory comes a path-breaking development in African politics and a watershed moment in Liberia's history.

Many have interpreted this victory as indicative of a kinder, gentler turn in African politics. Others see it as a blow against corruption, abuse of office and conflict. Let me hasten to say that these qualities cannot be either rationally or even meaningfully arrogated to women. There is no proof whatsoever that women are either kinder and gentler, or less corrupt and prone to conflict, than men. Regardless, Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson's victory is a great personal accomplishment as well as a touchstone for African women, particularly those that have valiantly and doggedly participated in the continent's politics as underdogs from the colonial era to the present. These women foot-soldiers in African politics hope in the first place, that diligence and doggedness can be rewarded with success and recognition. They also hope that women are henceforth accepted as leaders and decision-makers in their own right. Finally, they hope that women can be taken seriously as contenders for the most significant positions in public office.

For most of Africa's youth, majority of whom are women, this victory could also

be taken as a sign that it is worthwhile to strive and persevere and that one need not be a man to dream of political engagement and political leadership. As recently as the past two decades, Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson experienced and endured political persecution, and she survived and lived to tell about it, after a stint in Samuel Doe's jail. Hopefully, the prison experience would make her a fierce defender and promoter of the rights to dissent and the fundamental human rights of all Liberian peoples. Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson is also alleged to have supported Charles Taylor, the brutal dictator and human rights abuser who is now exiled in Nigeria but in order to accept that argument, one would have to agree that ECOMOG and its ECOMOG forces, which supervised the election that brought Taylor to power, are also his supporters. It bears note that Mrs. Jewel Taylor, also elected as a senator in the elections, and Taylor's wife supports Sirleaf-Johnson, and that George Weah's party is also reputed to be supported by some of the strongmen that most describe as "warlords". Clearly, contemporary Liberian politics cannot be understood if one engages in "off-the cuff" analysis and "knee-jerk responses".

This is a wonderful opportunity for Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson to rise to the challenge of history by providing exemplary leadership of which she and Africa's women and men would be proud. Given Liberia's tortuous history, this is a heavy responsibility. The country is just emerging from a destructive civil war. Many of the people, particularly the youth have been marked irreversibly – physically, psychologically and materially by the violence. Families have been torn apart, lives lost, property destroyed, people scattered as refugees and political exiles. Having experienced these circumstances firsthand, Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson must understand what the problems are and thus must attend immediately to reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. She also must preside over the healing of the body politic, political renewal and the facilitation of conciliatory relations among previously warring factions and those who feel that her victory has disfranchised them. Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson must also consider creative ways of surmounting the weight of Liberia's history by confronting the legacies of the country's colonization by the Americo-Liberians and the troubled relationship between them and the indigenes of the land.

As an immigrant woman living in America, Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson's success resonates to me on a personal level. Many know that she is a Harvard graduate and that she worked both at the World Bank and Citibank, but few know that before she went on to Harvard, she swept the floors and waited tables at a drugstore restaurant as a student in a business college in Wisconsin. The top positions held and experience garnered at the World Bank and Citibank should actually give one

pause because the former is a principal architect, promoter and enforcer of Structural Adjustment Programs on African countries. The consequence of the Programs is to rend the social fabric, immiserate the people (particularly women), and concentrate wealth in just a few hands. The latter is one of the movers and shakers in multinational lending and its policies have also contributed in no small measure to the high level of indebtedness of African countries.

Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson's immigrant experience is testament to the woman's strength, tenacity and diligence. It is also a very typical African immigrant story in America. It is possible to read this as the classic Horatio Alger story of "making something out of nothing". Some may also marvel that what appears to be a classic "rags to riches" story is possible only in America. My interpretation is that such success as Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson's is only possible for the select few who probably came to America equipped with a great deal of confidence, strong educational foundation, work ethic and will to succeed. Such individuals do not easily give up in the face of adversity. They manage to rise above the tremendous challenges of the immigrant experience because they frontally combat and surmount the "circumstances of their existence" and make a glorious history.

In spite of the plentiful landmines, numerous rivers to cross and mountains to climb, Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, here's hoping you can respond to the needs of poor, marginalized, embattled and excluded Liberians. Liberian women and majority of the Liberian people have expressed confidence in you. May you rise to the challenge of leadership and make us proud! The glory, I hope, is in the future. My hope is that Liberia's best is yet to come, and that Ms. Sirleaf-Johnson would lay the groundwork upon which future generations of Liberia can build.