

From Lifting Liberia to Lifting Liberians: Second Term Challenges for Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Written by Robtel Neajai Pailey

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ROBTEL NEAJAI PAILEY, JAN 31 2012

In an annual message to the National Legislature on Jan. 23, 2012, just a week after her second-term inauguration, incumbent Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf proclaimed, "In our first term we lifted Liberia; now we will lift Liberians!" The President was alluding to the tenets of Liberia's first post-war three-year medium term development agenda, the *Lift Liberia* Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), aimed at enhancing peace and security, revitalising the economy, strengthening justice and the rule of law, and restoring infrastructure and basic social services.

In asserting that Liberia had been lifted, the President was referring to key achievements in her first term, including but not limited to: renewing diplomatic ties with a number of international partners and multilateral agencies such as the United States, China, the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Development Bank, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund; refurbishing pot-holed ridden roads and constructing new ones; building hospitals and clinics, elementary, junior and secondary schools and community colleges; securing US\$16 billion in concessions in iron-ore, mining, forestry, rubber, and oil palm; and devolving power to Liberia's 15 sub-political divisions through political and fiscal decentralisation, amongst others.

Although some scholars and practitioners would argue that post-conflict reconstruction follows a 'one-size-fits-all' pattern of political and economic manipulation and engineering by the West[i], the Liberian president would certainly not agree with this assertion, having worked for the World Bank and United Nations in a previous life. Following the *Lift Liberia* PRS is an ambitious goal to make Liberia a middle income country by 2030, as articulated in the country's 18-year *Liberia Rising 2030* agenda, due to be crafted following nation-wide consultations beginning February 2012. Despite these lofty goals, there are a number of socio-political and economic challenges ahead in the next six-year term.

After struggling in Liberia's 2011 elections, in which the run-off with irate opposition candidate Winston Tubman was boycotted through to the counting of the very last ballot, President Johnson Sirleaf asserted that hope had been restored to Liberian people. Despite the President's optimism, a large section of the population, who voted for the opposition in the hopes of change, still remain disillusioned. With the opposition largely side-lined, and very few non-loyalists named to what was purported to be a government of inclusion, political reconciliation and democratic consolidation will be a tough battle ahead. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report is another thorny issue that has yet to be resolved, with an Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR) established at the end of the TRC's mandate to assess and implement its recommendations. The President vowed in her annual message to implement the 'practical recommendations' of the TRC, which includes palava hut discussions similar to the gacaca system employed in Rwanda. It is clear that the TRC's recommendation of prosecution of those who bear the greatest responsibility for atrocities committed during the civil war will not be a priority for the second term, though some Liberians are pushing for this agenda strongly. Nor will the recommendation of a thirty-year ban from political office of certain individuals—including the President herself—be implemented, it appears. Instead, the President has asked fellow 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate Leymah Gbowee to lead a National Reconciliation Initiative, whose scope and scale have yet to be defined. And the issue of former Liberian President Charles Taylor's pending verdict in The Hague this year has left many Liberians waiting with bated breath.

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Consolidating peace and security in light of the full military drawdown of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) beginning 2012 will remain a challenge in lifting Liberians as well. In light of the recent spate of violence within Ivory Coast, and the fragile nature of the Mano River Union, which Liberia chairs, it is clear that Liberia and its neighborhood remain fragile. The Liberia National Police (LNP) and the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), just fewer than 4,000 strong in total^[ii], will need to be expanded in order to strengthen domestic security and protect the geographic integrity of the country. It is clear that integrity of more than the security apparatus is needed, however.

Peace-building and peace-consolidation cannot be achieved without tackling corruption, Liberia's single most daunting challenge to date. Public officials have dragged their feet in declaring their assets and a Code of Conduct has languished in the National Legislature for over three years, prompting the President to sign an Administrative Code of Conduct by Executive Order for civil servants and political appointees within the Executive branch. Detractors have argued that the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) continues to be a toothless bulldog because of its inability to prosecute cases, leaving said cases in the hands of a Justice Ministry which has shown it is virtually incapacitated in this regard. It will be important in the next six years to devolve more power to the LACC, as too many incidences of corruption amongst public officials lowered citizen morale in the President's first term, prompting the then Auditor General, John Morlu, to pronounce in 2007 that Johnson Sirleaf's government was three times more corrupt than the National Transitional Government which ruled from 2003-2005. It is still unclear which benchmarks Morlu used to make such an inflammatory statement, though it still carries political purchase amongst the citizenry. With Morlu gone, Liberians wonder who will replace the media attention-grabbing, self-professed corruption watchdog, whose position is customarily appointed by the President.

President Johnson Sirleaf's vow to lift Liberians cannot be achieved without addressing the two single most marginalised groups in Liberia—women and youth. Women in Liberia inhabit less than 15% of the National Legislature, and as of today, with over 90 percent of the President's Cabinet appointed, pending confirmation from the National Legislature, there are only six female Cabinet officials out of 21 and one out of five female Justices of the Supreme Court. Clearly having strong female representation at all three levels of government, although not the panacea to women's empowerment, will be key to mitigating the gender divide in Liberia. A woman at the mantle of executive power is clearly not enough.

The challenge of youth development will simply not go away. The President acknowledged the yearnings of disaffected youth throughout Liberia, who represent over 50% of the country's population. She vowed that the years of deprivation and conflict will be a thing of the past. Despite this promise, however, Liberian youth in December 2011 looted the streets, setting cars ablaze and shutting the capital city of Monrovia down for a number of hours because they had not been paid US\$35.00 for a vacation job scheme implemented by the Monrovia City Corporation (MCC)^[iii]. These egregious acts of violence and intimidation cannot be rewarded, yet the administration must find concrete ways to respond to the disillusionment of young people which has become so commonplace. Although a number of schools and recreational facilities have been built, capacity building of teachers and school administrators continues to be a dogged challenge to the administration. The next six years will need to include improvements in vocational and higher education, so that capacity building remains a priority for young people to realize their full potential.

Just as reconciliation, women's empowerment and youth development must be a priority, so too must economic renewal in order for Liberians to be truly lifted. Liberia inherited a US\$4.9 billion debt when President Johnson Sirleaf took office in 2006^[iv]. That debt was waived in 2010 by commercial creditors, bilateral partners, and multilateral organisations such as the IMF, enabling Liberia to be eligible for limited loan facilities through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC), a program that critics argue has too many stringent fiscal conditionalities which make poor countries even poorer. Given that Liberia has a current cash based budget of a miniscule US\$516 million^[v], supplemented by millions more in aid, the challenge here will be for the country to use the facilities of HIPC to borrow in a limited fashion to finance capital intensive projects such as restoring the Mt. Coffee hydro plant, which will enable an increase in foreign direct investment and the attendant employment generation.

Liberia has projected a GDP growth of nine percent in 2012, with much of that coming from iron-ore production, commercial logging, and small and medium sized enterprises in rubber and oil palm exports^[vi]. Despite these

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impressive growth projections, the vast majority of Liberians work within the informal sector, and in the absence of a comprehensive labour market survey, the unofficial unemployment rate from 2003 stands at a stark 85%^[vii]. There will be a need to reconcile this unemployment rate, incorporate Liberians into the formal sector, and ensure that land management does not induce conflict. Just days after the President's inauguration, Silas Siakor, a Liberian environmentalist with the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI), wrote an op-ed^[viii] in the *New York Times* imploring the government to stop leasing large tracts of land to concessionaires, thereby endangering the future livelihoods of rural populations. The challenge here will not only be value addition for exportable raw materials, but also environmental sustainability and management of revenue earnings to ensure that growth and development happen simultaneously rather than in silos.

It is clear that Liberia has come a long way since 2006, when President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf took office for the first time amidst what appeared to be insurmountable challenges. In order to make good on her second-term promise to 'lift Liberians,' her approach to leadership and public administration must harken back to the people who presented her with a mandate to lead, as well as those who did not.

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[i] Luckham, Robin (2006), "The International Community and State Reconstruction in War-Torn Societies" in Picciotto, Robert and Rachel Weaving (eds), *Security and Development: Investing in Peace and Prosperity*, Oxford.

[ii] Malan, Mark (2009), "Security Sector Reform in Liberia" in Hany Besada (ed), *From Civil Strife to Peace-building: Examining Private Sector Involvement in West African Reconstruction*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

[iii] "Vacation Students Go Amok," AllAfrica.com news story, December 23, 2011: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201112230816.html>

[iv] Quarterly Economic Outlook 2010, Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, Republic of Liberia.

[v] Ministry of Finance, Republic of Liberia, 2011-2012 FY Budget (Passed by the National Legislature in 2011).

[vi] Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen, President of the Republic of Liberia Annual Message to the National Legislature, January 23, 2012.

[vii] "A Rapid Impact Assessment of the Global Economic Crisis on Liberia," International Labour Organisation (ILO), November 2009.

[viii] Siakor, Silas, "A Nobel Laureate's Problem at Home," *New York Times* Op-ed, January 20, 2012.