Uphill Task for Liberian President

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In Liberia and Nigeria, women with successful international careers have returned home to take on a mountain of social and economic challenges. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has already stamped her name in history as the first female president in Africa, but it will take all her skills as a former international banker and Africa director of the United Nations Development Programme to tackle the huge problems facing Liberia.

Amid tight security provided by UN peacekeepers and newly-trained Liberian police officers, the National Electoral Commission officially pronounced Johnson-Sirleaf winner of the final round of the presidential election last month. She won 59 per cent of the vote, with the challenger, international football hero George Weah, receiving 41 per cent.

Liberia is a country with a strange and tragic past, but the immediate focus is on the groundbreaking election of a woman to rule an African state.

At campaign rallies, Johnson-Sirleaf, 67, a former international banker, told the crowds, "I am woman, hear me roar. Africa is ready for a female president. Sooner or later, people will realise that both woman and man own this world together."

Her supporters wore T-shirts proclaiming, "All the men have failed Liberia: Let's try a woman this time", and lapel badges saying, "Ellen, she's our man".

Johnson-Sirleaf takes power in one of Africa's most troubled countries, which has just emerged from a quarter century of conflict during which factions loyal to different warlords destroyed the entire infrastructure. More than 250,000 Liberians, in a population of just over three million, died in the fighting.

Liberia was born in the 1820s from an idea conceived by then United States president James Monroe, who suggested giving freed slaves their own country in West Africa. The first ships carried the slaves to a part of the West African coast where, uninvited by the local people, they created the small settlement of Monrovia, named after Monroe.

In 1847, Liberia became independent, with its new black rulers from the American South marginalising the indigenous African groups, who were divided into tribes and spoke 29 different languages. The indigenous people were denied the vote and full civil rights until the Sixties.

In 1980 a "native" Liberian, army sergeant Samuel Doe, toppled the American-Liberian rulers, disembowelled President William Tolbert, and publicly executed thirteen government ministers on Monrovia's best tourist beach.

Doe, a member of the Krahn tribe, began a reign of terror over other groups before he too was toppled and tortured to death on camera. Chaos and bloodshed ensued, as warlords vied for territory and power.
In 1989, one of these warlords, Charles Taylor, emerged to become the new military dictator. Under his rule, Liberia turned into a bankrupt failed state, and Taylor is also accused of fuelling conflict in three neighbouring states - Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast.

Taylor went into exile two years ago, and a UN peacekeeping force moved in, creating the stability which eventually allowed last month's election to take place.

The challenges facing Johnson-Sirleaf are immense. She has to bridge the gap between the indigenous Liberians and her own people, the Americo-Liberians, who historically mistreated them. Other pressing issues include the 80 per cent unemployment; water and electricity systems that have been totally destroyed; wrecked government hospitals and schools; and the threat of a new insurgency.

An arrest warrant has been issued for Taylor by a UN-backed court in Sierra Leone, on charges of war crimes both there and in his own country. The indictment for Sierra Leone charges Taylor with mass murder, rape and the extensive use of child soldiers, through the Revolutionary United Front, a rebel group notorious for mutilation as well as murder.

The question now being asked around Africa is whether the election of a woman president is the start of a trend on the continent. Johnson-Sirleaf has said she wants "to bring motherly sensitivity and emotion to the presidency" as a way of healing the wounds of war.

Until Johnson-Sirleaf was elected, the most powerful woman in Africa was probably Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the finance minister of Nigeria.

There are plenty of analogies between the two: both are Harvard-educated with a career in banking, in Okonjo-Iweala's case as a World Bank vice-president, and both have massive economic and social problems to tackle.

Okonjo-Iweala was lured back from Washington to sort out Nigeria's chaotic finances and curb corruption. Fixing it will be no easy task - Transparency International, the Berlin-based corruption watchdog, ranks Nigeria as the second most corrupt country in the world.

As finance minister, Okonjo-Iweala has begun trimming Nigeria's bloated civil service and accounting strictly for all the money the government spends. She has sought to stop Nigeria's oil riches being squandered by a tiny elite, and to ensure that the revenue goes towards providing clean water, schools and healthcare. She has also negotiated a debt relief deal with the world's most developed countries worth ten billion pounds sterling.

Okonjo-Iweala takes no nonsense from President Olusegun Obasanjo. When he threatened to remove the vital budget and planning departments from her ministry, she quit, returning only when he backed down.

"When I became finance minister they called me Okonjo-Wahala - or Trouble Woman. It means I give you hell. But I don't care what names they call me," she said recently.

"When I see vested interests still try to undermine me, I know it means I'm successful.... The ability to change things is a powerful incentive."