

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

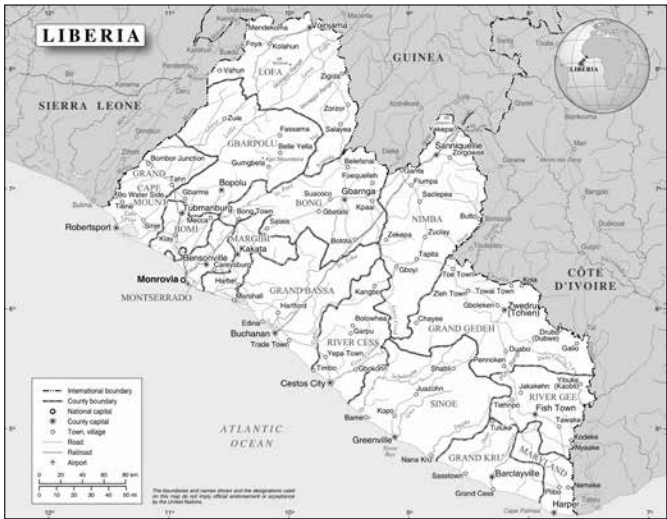
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Introduction

On Friday, October 7, 2011, the Nobel Peace Prize committee took a step into history by awarding the prize to three women from Africa, two of them relatively unknown activists at the time. The committee presented the award to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (president of Liberia), Leymah Gbowee (Liberia), and Tawakkol Karman (Yemen) “for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.”¹ The previous time that the Nobel committee had made the award to three individuals was nearly twenty years earlier, in 1994, when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to three high-profile leaders in Middle East politics: Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin. With the 2011 award, the prize committee affirmed the growing international commitment to women’s participation in peace building, exemplified by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000, on women, war, and peace.²

In its official statement, the Nobel committee said, “We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities



Liberia. Map No. 3775 Rev. 9, September 2014, United Nations.

as men to influence developments at all levels of society.” The most famous of these new laureates was Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, then campaigning for her second term as president of Liberia. The Nobel committee said of her: “Sirleaf is Africa’s first democratically elected female president. Since her inauguration in 2006, she has contributed to securing peace in Liberia, to promoting economic and social development, and to strengthening the position of women.”

For most of Liberia’s history few people outside West Africa even knew about the country. If they had heard of Liberia, they usually knew two things: that African Americans associated with missions colonized

the country in the mid-nineteenth century, and that in the 1990s and early 2000s militias in Liberia's civil war perpetrated terrible human rights abuses involving child soldiers and sexualized violence. However, such associations have receded. In 2008, the rather romantic film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, which chronicled women's role in ending the Liberian war, won the award for Best Documentary at the Tribeca Film Festival. The film received many subsequent awards and was also shown on PBS, introducing a wider audience to the issues of war, peace, and women's rights in Liberia.

Today Liberia is famous for having two Nobel Peace Prize winners, Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee, head of the women's peace movement, for having the first elected woman president on the African continent, and for being a hub of experiments making women's rights part of the agenda for transitional justice and post-conflict reconstruction. When this book was being written, Liberia had also become the epicenter of the world's largest and most critical Ebola epidemic in history. Ebola revealed the limits of governance in Liberia and citizens' distrust of Sirleaf in her second term, but it also showed the incredible discipline of Liberians who made their country the first in the region to be declared free of Ebola by changing greeting and burial practices, among others. History will remember Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as a landmark and potentially game-changing president of Liberia and a force for women's rights in the international community. Whether her legacy will

be remembered for changing the fundamental tensions and issues that have plagued Liberia is less certain.

For all these reasons there is immense interest in both Liberia and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. The UN and virtually every nongovernmental organization in the world have been working in Liberia since 2003, especially on issues of sexual violence and rule of law. These organizations include the International Red Cross, the International Rescue Committee, UNIFEM (now UN Women), the Carter Center, Doctors without Borders, and many others. Their presence has helped bring Liberia into international news and has also created a conversation on Liberia that inspires young people to know more about the country.

Sirleaf's life speaks to many of the key themes facing the twenty-first century: the rise of women as a force to be reckoned with in national and international politics, the challenges of reconciling indigenous rights and experiences with national laws and urban dominance (a particular theme of Liberian history and contemporary life), the rise of ravaging civil wars and sexual violence, and the challenges of transitional justice in building a postconflict society. In 2014 Liberia also became known as the place that the deadly Ebola virus metastasized: Liberia began to implode under the weight of the disease and poor infrastructure. Ebola cast a shadow over Sirleaf's legacy. The government's authoritarian and inept handling of the disease revealed the enduring challenges facing this postconflict country and the

limits of Sirleaf's technocratic approach to government in a country where so many had no access to the basic political and economic infrastructure, and where the ongoing divide between elites and other citizens continued to be a marked feature of Liberian life. However, Liberia's victory over this Ebola outbreak also can be seen as part of Sirleaf's achievement. As ever, writing history as it happens leaves much room for ambiguity.

Sirleaf's life and career exemplify the move of women into the highest echelons of international human rights. Her biography also is the story of a woman from a small country in West Africa, whose terrible civil war in the 1990s and early 2000s brought it to international attention, and who navigated her way through complex political terrain for much of her career. Her biography is thus closely linked to the story of Liberia and to the story of women's rights as international rights. Those are themes I develop in the chapters that follow.