

Biographical Brief of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is the 24th President of Liberia and the first elected female Head of State in Africa. She is serving her second term as President after winning the 2011 presidential election. One of the three Nobel Peace Prize Laureates of 2011, President Sirleaf throughout her career has demonstrated passionate commitment to hard work, integrity and good governance, advocating for the rights of women and the importance of education to provide a better future for her country and its people.

Born Ellen Eugenia Johnson in Monrovia on October 29, 1938, she is the granddaughter of a traditional chief of renown in western Liberia and a market woman from the southeast. She grew up in Liberia and attended high school at the College of West Africa in Monrovia, subsequently studying at Madison Business College, the University of Colorado and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government where she obtained a Master's Degree in Public Administration in 1971.

Her entry into politics came in 1972 when she delivered her now famous commencement address to her high school alma mater in which she sharply criticized the government, showing her determination to speak truth unto power. This was the start of a distinguished professional and political career spanning nearly four decades.

In 1965 she joined the then Treasury Department in Liberia, rising to the position of Minister of Finance in 1979 where she introduced measures to curb the mismanagement of government finances. After the 1980 military coup d'état, Johnson Sirleaf served as President of the Liberian Bank for Development and Investment (LBDI) but fled Liberia and the increasingly suppressive military government that same year. She traveled to Kenya and served as Vice President of CITICORP's Africa Regional Office in Nairobi, and later moved to Washington, D.C. to assume the position of Senior Loan Officer at the World Bank, and as Vice President for Equator Bank. In 1992 she joined the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as Assistant Administrator and Director of its Regional Bureau of Africa with the rank of Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations.

However, with her country still very much at heart, Johnson Sirleaf resigned in 1997 to return home and contest the presidential election and was ranked second in votes to opponent Charles Taylor. She went into self-imposed exile, this time to Côte d'Ivoire where she kept a close eye on Liberian politics. During that time she established, in Abidjan, Kormah Development and Investment Corporation, a venture capital vehicle for African entrepreneurs, and Measuagoon, a Liberian community development NGO.

In 2003 when Charles Taylor was exiled to Nigeria and the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) was formed, Johnson Sirleaf was selected to serve as Chairperson of the Governance Reform Commission where she led the country's anti-corruption reform by changing the reporting mechanism of the General Auditing Commission from the Executive to the Legislature, thereby strengthening and reinforcing its independence. She resigned this position to successfully contest the 2005 presidential election, resulting in her historic inauguration on January 16, 2006, as President of Liberia.

After decades of fighting for freedom, justice and equality in Liberia, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has spent more than six years rebuilding post-conflict Liberia. She has revived national hope by strengthening the institutions of national security and good governance, leading the revitalization of the national economy and infrastructure, including the construction of more than 800 miles of roads, and restoring Liberia's international reputation and credibility.

President Johnson Sirleaf has built strong relations with regional partners and the international community, attracting investment of over \$16 billion in Liberia's mining, agriculture and forestry sectors, and off-shore oil exploration to provide jobs for her people. Her leadership has led to more than \$4 billion in debt relief in June 2010 and to the lifting of UN trade sanctions to allow Liberia access to international markets. She has increased the national budget from \$80 million in 2006 to more than half a billion in 2011 and has driven annual GDP growth to at least 7 percent the same period.

President Johnson Sirleaf is Chairperson of the African Leaders Malaria Alliance, having succeeded the founding Chair, Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete in January 2012. ALMA is an alliance of African Heads of State and Government working to end malaria-related deaths. She serves as Chairperson of the Mano River Union where she leads the effort for political stability and economic cooperation among Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. The Liberian leader is also Goodwill Ambassador for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Africa. She was a founding member of the International Institute for Women in Political Leadership; was designated in 1999 by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) (now African Union) to serve on the committee to investigate the Rwanda genocide; was a Commission Chair for the Inter-Congolese Dialogue; and was selected by UNIFEM as one of two persons to investigate and report on the effect of conflict on women and women's roles in peacebuilding.

Before her ascendancy to the presidency, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf served on many advisory boards, including the International Crisis Group (USA) and Women Waging Peace (USA), and she is the recipient of numerous prestigious awards, among them: the FAO CERES Medal (2008); the Crisis Group Fred Cuny Award for the Prevention of Deadly Crisis (2008) for outstanding leadership in democracy, development and peacebuilding in Africa; and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2007), the highest civilian honor bestowed by an American president.

President Sirleaf has been recognized with numerous awards, including 14 honorary degrees from American colleges and universities. In 2010, Newsweek magazine listed Johnson Sirleaf as one of the ten best leaders in the world; Time placed her among the top ten female leaders; and the Economist called her "the best President the country has ever had."