



## **THE IMPACT OF LIBERIA'S ELECTION ON WEST AFRICA Challenges and Prospects**

**Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations  
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations  
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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored and pleased to be invited to testify before today on the impact of Liberia's recent election on the West African subregion. My testimony is based not only on firsthand observations made as an election observer during the first round of voting last October, but also on reports from well-placed contacts in Liberia and throughout the subregion as well as my own experience, dating back to the 1990s, of the subregion and my ongoing academic research. I have written extensively about politics in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the countries of the Mano River Union (Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea), including two books entitled *Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State* and *Child Soldiers, Adult Interests: The Global Dimensions of the Sierra Leonean Tragedy*.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's January 16, 2006, inauguration as the 24th president of Liberia, the West African country originally established as a homeland for freed slaves and other African-Americans "repatriated" from the United States, coming after national elections in October 2005 and a presidential run-off in November in which she won 59.4 percent of the vote against soccer superstar George Manneh "Oppong" Weah, is historically significant for a number of reasons. The election was arguably the freest, fairest, and most democratic poll since the nation's independence in 1847. As the first woman elected head of state in Africa, Johnson-Sirleaf represents a remarkable breakthrough in what historically has been a predominantly patriarchal society where women have largely been relegated to the periphery of political life (the new president campaigned explicitly on her gender, and many of her supporters sported T-shirts that proclaimed

“All the men have failed Liberia; let’s try a woman this time”). The generally smooth transition back to constitutional government also fulfilled one of the key objectives of the August 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended the country’s second civil war in a decade and began post-war transition and peace-building processes in which both the United Nations and the United States government were heavily invested.

While these are by no means insignificant achievements, it would be dangerous to overestimate their importance in the context of the violent conflicts which have wracked Liberia for nearly three decades and which have repeatedly ignited regional conflagrations that consumed—and, in some parts, continues to plague—its neighbors Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d’Ivoire. To paraphrase Robert Frost, there are many promises to keep and miles to go before we can sleep. While the installation of the new government completes the electoral process, by my reckoning at least *six key challenges* must be addressed by the Liberian government and the international community as part of a comprehensive national and regional peacebuilding process.

Mr. Chairman, with your permission I will briefly outline each of these challenges in turn before proceeding to address the *regional context* and why I believe it is in the broader interests of the United States to commit ourselves, in cooperation with our international partners, to a *sustained engagement to assure the success of the reconstruction and peacebuilding process* in Liberia.

### **Building a National Government**

With some more-or-less minor exceptions—none of which were of the magnitude that would have altered the final results—the election process was well-run, especially when one considers the rather daunting infrastructure challenges to the poll. The U.S. alone contributed over \$10 million to the effort, most of it dispersed through civil society organizations involved in democratization efforts, including IFES (technical assistance for polling), the International Republican Institute (training for political parties), and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (civic education). More than 6,000 Liberians, including some 3,500 from local civil society organizations, were accredited to monitor the voting.

About 1.35 million people registered to vote in April and May 2005. Of these, approximately 1.012 million (74.9 percent) voted in the October elections, and over 825,716 (61.2 percent) participated in the November run-off. It should be noted that while Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf’s win has been termed “decisive,” the final tally actually represented an effective endorsement by only 35.4 percent of the registered electorate.

While this does not detract from her legitimacy, one should be cautious in overstating levels of support.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the orderly, well-administered, and free and fair nature of the poll is truly remarkable when one considers the subregional context: a civil war has delayed polls in Côte d'Ivoire; Sierra Leone's elections are marred by both the corruption of the ruling elites and onerous legal conditions that make it difficult for reformers to dislodge the political class; and Guinea's president, who is not up for reelection until 2010, consistently "wins" over 90 percent of the vote.

In any event, the electorate has complicated Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf's task by giving no single party a governing mandate. In fact, several parties that lost the presidential race scored well enough in legislative races to be in good positions to wield significant influence. Mr. Weah's Congress for Democratic Change (CDC), for example, won more seats than any other party in the House of Representatives. The fractionalized composition of the legislature, however, can be both positive and negative. Decision-making will have to require coalition-building and consensus, which would be a welcome departure from Liberia's tradition of winner-take-all politics. On the other hand, there is also the risk of political gridlock and/or lack of clear policy direction as alliances form and shift on an *ad hoc* basis.

The election results also show the worrying, but not surprising, persistence of regional patterns of voting that need to be closely watched. For example, the CDC took ten of fourteen House seats and both Senate seats in Montserrado County (around the capital), while Grand Gedeh County gave George Weah 96 percent of its vote; similarly, ALCOP, the party of former warlord Alhaji Kromah took two of the four House seats and one of the Senate seats in Lofa County (on the Guinean and Sierra Leonean border), while Bong and Grand Cape Mount Counties went heavily for the erstwhile party of former Liberian president Charles Taylor, the National Patriotic Party (NPP), which won both Senate seats in Grand Cape Mount (next to Sierra Leone).

President Johnson-Sirleaf will need to rapidly undertake concrete efforts to build a "national unity coalition" out of this less-than-optimal political situation if she hopes to promote national reconciliation and advance her agenda.

### **Constitutional Reform**

Ironically, Liberia's democratically-elected president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, assumed power under Liberia's 1984 constitution, a ramshackle adaptation of the country's seriously flawed 19th-century constitution with adjustments to suit the exigencies of

then-ruling dictator, Samuel Doe. Under this charter, the president, elected for a renewable six-year-term—Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf has pledged not to seek a second term—holds broad powers that ensure a very centralized regime. The unreformed Liberian constitution provides for precisely the “winner-take-all” system that has been the bane of many post-colonial African polities, with competing factions given little incentive to accept anything short of “total victory”—and with a history of breaking down, with tragic consequences. In this respect, the Liberian election, should a dialogue on constitutional reform not ensue, perversely sends the wrong signal to the region that “it’s back to business as usual.”

Given the multitude of challenges facing post-war Liberia, it would have perhaps been preferable for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement to have postponed elections while including within the brief of the transitional government and the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) the mandate to help Liberians undertake a process of constitutional choice regarding governmental institutions and other structures—to say nothing of the other conditions that a democratic polity presupposes. But, given that the international community had committed itself to staging a vote last year and that Liberia’s politicians and people had come to expect it, the electoral process had to go forward. Now, however, the freshly inaugurated administration should be strongly encouraged to begin that process of constitutional dialogue. Carried out successfully, it would be a powerful precedent in the region.

### **Post-Conflict Accountability**

The July 28, 2005, communiqué of the heads of state of the Mano River Union recommended deferring any decision on the Taylor dossier until after a new Liberian president was in office. President Johnson-Sirleaf’s pronouncements to date show that she is clearly sensitive to the potentially destabilizing effects extraditing the former Liberian leader for trial, whether it be before the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which has indicted him on no less than seventeen counts of war crimes and other serious violations of international humanitarian law stemming from the brutal Sierra Leonean conflict that he had precipitated as a sideshow to his own fight for power in Liberia, or before some other tribunal for offenses committed in Liberia.

However, while I defer to the esteemed former Prosecutor of the Special Court in the matter of Mr. Taylor, I would add that very little attention has been paid to the need for accountability by individuals aside from the former Liberian president. By making Charles Taylor the almost exclusive object of attention under the heading of “post-conflict accountability,” the international community risks giving the impression that he was the *only* actor in the nightmare that played out across the region. While Charles

Taylor was—and is—in my judgment one of the principal criminals who took advantage of conditions of anarchy and should be brought to justice, he neither caused the “coming of the anarchy” in the first place nor was he the only one who arbitrated those conditions to personal profit.

Several freshly elected members of new government, including some who still fall on the United Nation’s travel ban, also have much to answer for, including Senator Jewel Howard-Taylor, just-divorced wife of Charles Taylor; Senator Prince Johnson, the former warlord who personally tortured President Samuel Doe to death—on candid camera, no less—at the start of the first Liberian civil war; Senator Adolphus Dolo, formerly known as “General Peanut Butter”; Speaker of the House Edwin Snowe, formerly Charles Taylor’s son-in-law, who is suspected of still funneling money to deposed leader; and Representative Saah Richard Gbollie, a former police chief in the Taylor regime who is accused of overseeing the torture of civil society leaders.

The international community should both insist that the Liberian government develop the mechanisms of accountability and be prepared to assist in that process.

### **Legal and Judicial Reform**

It is well and fine to talk about restoring the “rule of law” in the abstract, but Liberia faces a tremendous challenge with law in the concrete. Aside from the constitutional question of the executive branch’s historical domination over a weak judiciary, there is the very real—but generally unnoticed—problem of what the law *is*. The Liberian Code of Laws was essentially cobbled together in the 1950s by a group of American academics, led by Cornell University professor Joseph Konvitz, working on a summer grant—it was even published in Ithaca. Since then it has not been systematically updated.

The court system is in total disarray. According to *The Analyst* newspaper, during 2005, only thirteen of twenty-two circuit judges were in office and, of this number, four were on sick leave while another four are nearing retirement. In other words, there were only five qualified judges to run the entire formal court system of Liberia. In rural areas, the problem is even worse. Justice is supposed to be meted out by customary courts composed of chiefs and elders. However, a survey by UNMIL found more than half of these magistrates were illiterate, leaving themselves, even in the best of circumstances, open to arbitrariness.

While an unreformed legal sector has the potential of undermining any progress, legal and judicial reform have barely been acknowledged in reform measures such as the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Plan (GEMAP).

### **Economic Governance Reform**

Since other witnesses will address the GEMAP program at length, I will limit myself to the observation that Liberia faces two closely-related challenges in the economic sector. The first is an urgent need to repair the country's utterly devastated infrastructure. It is futile to even talk of an economy when, outside of enclaves occupied by international personnel, there is no electricity, no piped water, no telephone lines, no sewage systems, and almost no roads. The second is that economic growth is the only way to sustain socio-economic recovery in a country where, out of a population of three million, over 700,000—more than half of whom are classified as internally displaced persons (IDPs)—persons depend on food assistance each month. This is also key to the security challenge lest disgruntled demobilize combatants drift back into violence for want of more pacific occupations. Given Liberia's demographic profile, with over half of the population being under 30 years of age, and the context of lack of economic opportunities, the reality is that unemployed youth represent a potentially deadly threat to the viability of any security sector undertakings not only in Liberia, but across the West African subregion.

### **Security Sector Reform**

Officially, some 103,018 combatants, 11 percent of them children, participated in the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process during the two-year transition. Although the process was declared to have been concluded in November 2004, the reality is that it has been far from comprehensive. First, there are serious numerical inconsistencies: for example, while over 100,000 combatants were "disarmed," only about 27,000 weapons were actually collected; for another, while 103,018 combatants were "disarmed" and demobilized, only 13,872 were actually engaged in the reintegration program. Second, it is my considered opinion that even the number 100,000 does not encompass all combatants during Liberia's civil wars as some young fighters did not report for DDR while others had fallen out with their combat units before the 2003 fighting, but nonetheless remain marked by their earlier conflict experience.

The United States has undertaken the burden of training a new 2,000-strong national Liberian army, the responsibility being subcontracted to DynCorp and Pacific Architects and Engineers, two private firms that will work in coordination with U.S. military

personnel. According to the State Department, the training package is estimated to cost around \$95 million, which will most likely be drawn from a combination of International Disaster and Famine Assistance, Regional Peacekeeping, and Foreign Military Assistance funds.

Aside from the very legitimate political questions regarding the democratic governance of the reformed security services, the question remains whether the resources being dedicated to the effort are adequate for the task, especially when one considers the regional situation.

### **The Regional Context**

It is impossible to treat the question of Liberia's prospects in isolation with those of its subregional neighbors. Not only have the histories of the peoples of these countries been intertwined since before the colonial era, but they remain very much so today. As I alluded at the beginning of my remarks, the first Liberian civil war made the outbreak of conflict in the neighboring states well-nigh inevitable. Today, the situation in those countries could well undo all the progress in Liberia unless they are either contained or the capacity is built up in Liberia to ride out what I anticipate will be the next wave of violent upheaval in the region.

On paper, Sierra Leone, where the U.N. mission wrapped up on the last day of 2005, is well on the road to recovery. And while last year the country finally ceded its decades-long occupancy of the last place on the U.N. Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI), many of the problems that facilitated the spread of violence during its civil war persist, including lack of economic opportunities for a burgeoning youth population and the monopolization of power and wealth by a corrupt ruling elite which is, in turn, divided among itself over the distribution of spoils. A closer look below the surface reveals that the only thing lacking to recreate the conditions of 1991 (the year of the outbreak of civil war in Sierra Leone) is a spark from the outside—as Charles Taylor was when he sent Foday Sankoh into Sierra Leone at the head of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

For over three years now, Côte d'Ivoire has been caught up in a seemingly intractable civil conflict between the government in Abidjan and rebels who effectively control the north of the country. The situation is perhaps most heated in the country's west, along the Liberian border—an ironic reversal from the Liberian civil wars of the 1990s and early years of the current decade—where there are large movements of combatants, civilians, exploited natural resources, and other economic goods. Adding to the potential combustibility of this area are the geographical, political, and ethnic realities. Recall that

it was along this area that Charles Taylor supplied his rebels during the first Liberian civil war; the anti-Taylor Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) did likewise during the second civil war. In the recent elections, Grand Gedeh Country, which borders on Côte d'Ivoire voted almost exclusively for the defeated George Weah. Ethnically, there are close ties between the peoples on both sides of the international boundary.

Guinea is, in my judgment, both the most ignored country and, potentially, the most critical one in the subregion as it faces the end of the long tenure at the helm of President Lansana Conté. Despite having the largest standing military among the three Mano River countries, Guinea is a prime target for one or another insurgency group, both because of simmering ethnic tensions between the ruling Sousou and the Malinké of its eastern forest region and the Peul of its northwestern Fouta Djallon highlands and because of its own involvement in the Liberian, Sierra Leonean, and Ivorian civil wars. The latter *imbroglio* was in some cases due to ethnic solidarity, for example, the interrelations of the Guinean Malinké with the Liberian Mandingo and Ivorian Dyula leading to support for twin United Liberian Movements for Democracy (ULIMO) during the first Liberian civil war; in other cases, it involved direct government sponsorship, as in the backing that General Conté's regime gave to the anti-Taylor Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) forces in the second Liberian civil war.

While the democratic renaissance in Liberia might serve as an inspiration for long dormant civil society in Guinea, it is also equally possible that the mayhem that would ensue should General Conté die without laying a better foundation than he has done in the last two decades would result in a "blowback" that sweeps up the nascent government in Monrovia. Regrettably, the Guinean head of state's political strategy has been precisely the opposite, consisting primarily of a Machiavellian balance between ethnic favoritism and cynical manipulation of competing forces. In all likelihood, this delicate balance will come undone when President Conté dies or becomes incapacitated and the country will face first personal competition for power among members of the military oligarchy and then ethnic tensions. The first will involve a contest between 400-strong Presidential Guard ("Beret Rouges"), based in the capital of Conakry, and two 800-strong Ranger battalions, one trained by U.S. Special Forces between 2000 and 2002 and based in N'Zérékoré and one trained by China in 2003 and based in Kankan. The second will pit the Beret Rouges and Rangers as well as the military high command, almost all of whom are ethnic Sousou and indeed from the president's extended family and village, against others who have seen their economic, political, and military advancement blocked because they are not Sousou.

Because of the potential for instability originating in Conakry and reverberating throughout the subregion after the eventual demise of General Conté, there are many,



both in the subregion and outside of it, who discerned the hand of Charles Taylor in the shots fired at President Conté's motorcade in January 2005. (One might add that on the question of Charles Taylor, it would suffice to recall that, notwithstanding the efforts of Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo to frame the question of his extradition as a purely Liberian matter, the former Liberian warlord and president's career since he launched the first Liberian civil war on Christmas Eve 1989 has consistently involved the entire subregion, with some states supporting him, while others opposed him, and conflicts ignited in every country bordering Liberia. Consequently, even the question of Mr. Taylor's fate demands a regional approach.)

While broadening the scope of engagement to encompass a subregional approach will necessarily be more expensive than a single-country approach, the U.S. and other international actors will find that the costs of having to return to the region to deal with another transnational humanitarian crisis will require far greater resources than preventive engagement today.

### **Advancing Broader U.S. Interests**

Aside from the longstanding historical, political, cultural, and affective ties that bind the America and Liberia together, the pivotal geopolitical role that the West African country currently plays in a region whose strategic importance to the United States is rapidly increasing demands strategic engagement. To cite but one datum, according to the National Intelligence Council, within the decade the subregion, which currently accounts for about one-sixth, will be providing more than one-quarter of North America's hydrocarbon energy needs, thus surpassing the total volume of oil imports from the Middle East. Is it merely altruism or coincidence that the People's Republic of China chose Liberia as the theater for its first-ever foray into international peacekeeping?

Liberia, while small in population and without any hydrocarbon reserves discovered to date, is in many ways the key to the entire subregion. If Liberia remains stable, the fragile peace in Sierra Leone will be reinforced, the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire will be contained, and collapse of Guinea mitigated. A democratic Liberia—and the Liberian people want it to be such—will be a beacon for the entire subregion. A growing Liberian economy will beckon Liberian refugees—some of them fighters in the battles of others, moving from conflict to conflict—home and absorb resources that would otherwise collect in a transnational war economy. If, on the other hand, Liberia stagnates or, worse, slides back into chaos, it will once again serve as both catalyst and fuel in a regional conflagration that will undo a decade's worth of patient efforts by the United States, our British and French allies (in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire respectively), and the international community in general.

Mr. Chairman, permit me to conclude with three modest, but important recommendations. First, the Assistant Secretary and her team should be encouraged to continue closely monitoring progress in Liberia, making it the priority that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has assured us that it will be. We cannot afford to let potential for success dissipate for want of attention. Second, the Liberian government should be encouraged by the Congress to build on the momentum of the election and President Johnson-Sirleaf's inauguration to tackle the challenges of building a national government, engaging in constitutional, legal, economic, and security sector reforms, and demanding accountability from Charles Taylor and other responsible for the crimes committed during the long conflicts. While some of these undertakings are not particularly glamorous, they are critical. Monrovia needs to be convinced both that Washington takes their implementation seriously and will hold its partners accountable for their performance (or lack thereof) and that we will sustain our commitment. This Congress has provided substantial support for reconstruction and peacebuilding in Liberia. Perhaps what is needed is a clear signal of its expectations. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, the situation in the West African subregion is constantly evolving. However, the one factor that remains constant is that the underlying dynamics are *regional* and require as such more than a pastiche of *ad hoc* approaches. I applaud the Subcommittee for the more inclusive theme of this oversight hearing. May I be so bold as to suggest that periodical review might help focus the attention needed on this increasingly significant geopolitical space?

Mr. Chairman, I hope that I have been able to sketch out some of the challenges and prospects affecting Liberia, the West African subregion, and the United States, in the wake of the recent Liberian elections. I look forward to your questions and observations. And I renew my thanks to you and the Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear before you today.