



Médecins du monde / Magnum
Magnum in Motion

LIBERIA : POLITICAL PROCESS

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Introduction

The Liberian civil war ended in 2003. Today, there is a real will of reconciliation from the population, and the confidence given to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is very strong. Despite this confidence, the population still doesn't trust public institutions, marked by years of corruption. Thus the challenges become even more difficult to overcome, and any mistake, exploited by the opposition, could revive tensions. Therefore, in order to live up to the population's hopes of a sustainable peace, the main question is: how could the political context be stabilised?

I. The challenges of political stabilisation

War in Liberia ended after President Charles Taylor's exile to Nigeria and thanks to the support of the International Community, notably to ensure security. A National Transitional Government was implemented, and its mission was to guarantee that the Peace Agreement, which ended the war, was enforced. It included the organisation of presidential elections in 2005. They took place rather quietly according to the international observers whose assessment was quite positive. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won the elections, defeating George Weah in the second round. Being the first ever elected women Head of State in Africa, Ellen Johnson can easily draw the International Community's attention to Liberia.

A. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's priorities

Ellen Johnson won the election with almost 60% of the votes, and in January 2006, she was sworn in as Liberia's new President. She personifies the will of the population to make a break with the past. She has always been involved in politics: in the 1970's, she served as Finance Minister, and in 1997, she ran unsuccessfully against Taylor for the Presidency.

In her acceptance speech in January 2006, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf gave a message of hope and national reconciliation. She hopes that, thanks to her long career within international institutions, notably the World Bank, the International Community –which welcomed her election- will trust her and bring support to rebuild the infrastructures and the Liberian economy. In doing so, she has tried to attract foreign investors, which is a difficult task given the level of corruption in the country and its constant instability. In the National budget for 2006/2007, that was approved in August 2006, it is planned that the country will have revenue of 130 million USD (coming from taxes on revenue, profits, properties, international trade, etc; and less certainly on wood, diamonds, rubber and

iron). These sums will be used in priority for reconstruction and development in Liberia.

To ensure stability and social peace, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf must find a way to keep the promises she made during the elections. A few month after she became President, as promised, she managed to bring water and electricity back in a part of Monrovia, to improve the inhabitants' lives.

In October 2006, a commission called '*Truth and Reconciliation*', in charge of investigating the crimes committed during the long period of war, started to collect testimonies. It is very difficult to separate the victims of these crimes from their perpetrators, because most Liberians were both during the war. The main objective of this Commission is national reconciliation. However, lack of resources and logistical problems prevent the Commission from being efficient, and in December 2006, it announced that it suspended its activities.

In March 2006, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf obtained from Nigeria that Charles Taylor be extradited to be tried by the Sierra Leone Special Tribunal, in charge of bringing proceedings against the perpetrators of the crimes committed during the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2001). Charles Taylor was charged with crimes against humanity and was also accused of having supported a Sierra Leonean rebel movement, the Revolutionary United Front. To counter the threats to security and stabilisation in Liberia, the trial took place in The Hague. Because Charles Taylor still has support in West Africa, he remains a threat and a factor of instability in the region. His trial is a strong sign sent to the Liberian population: a hope that the peace process can be sustainable.

B. Establishing political credibility: the difficult choice of the members of government

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's credibility is linked to her capacity to keep her electoral promises and how she gathers the population around the effort of peace and reconciliation. Indeed, the expectations and hopes of the population are very high, and the process is long and difficult.

The government's formation was gradually announced. The main preoccupation was to ensure that every ethnical and political tendency was represented, in order to implement a viable and stable government. It was also necessary to be sure of the loyalty of the members of the government. Those who already had a recognized professional experience were the first to be appointed.

C. Fighting against corruption, a necessary condition to restore international and national confidence.

Corruption is one of the main obstacles in the reconstruction of Liberia, and therefore, one of the President's major priorities is to eradicate it. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf wants to reinforce her country's credibility at the international level, to bring back foreign investors and international aid in Liberia, as well as at the national level, to strengthen the government's authority.

Corruption is a very common practice and its effects are particularly disastrous in poor countries. Not only does it slow down economic development, but it also undermines the governments' credibility. In Liberia, corruption has been very strong for decades, and particularly during Charles Taylor's Presidency. However, the National Transitional Government also took advantage of this practice of bad management and misappropriation of funds and even signed dubious contracts with numerous foreign companies eager to exploit the country's natural resources. As soon as she came to power, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf fired all the staff of the Finance Ministry, the Department of Treasury and Budget, and set up an audit of the ministries and public funds. She also ended or renegotiated some international contracts whose legality was questioned.

Liberia is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. This can be explained by poverty but also by the lack of control of funds management. The major challenges of the political process, or the restructuring of the State apparatus, is to rebuild a political community, raise State employees' wages and ensure that they get paid regularly, and train qualified people for these positions. It also implies overcoming the lack of office and communication equipment, particularly to facilitate coordination between the local authorities and the government in Monrovia.

Today, these objectives are still difficult to achieve, particularly because of the lack of infrastructures and the very limited financial resources of the country. As far as funds management is concerned, a code of best practice has been set up for State employees, but the country still needs an effective system to end corruption. At the national level, a strategy to fight against corruption is currently being studied.

GEMAP

The International Community, through the United Nations and the World Bank, has a determining role and influence in the reconstruction of the political system and Liberian economy. In September 2005, the National Transitional Government, the United Nations, the World Bank, the EU, the IMF, the African Union, ECOWAS, Ghana, Nigeria and the USA signed an agreement to implement a system that would ensure good economic governance.

GEMAP (Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program) is a guarantee for the donors and investors that the population will directly benefit from the funds allocated to the reconstruction of the country. This programme is a sort of "International supervision", since it consists of the co-signature of the international contracts by an international expert and a member of the government in the Government Ministries, agencies or companies (Roberts International Airport, Central Bank...)

This measure has been imposed by the International Community, and even though Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has said the country doesn't need this programme under her Presidency, she inherited this agreement and has to face international pressure. Although GEMAP is accused of undermining Liberia's sovereignty, and despite its insufficiencies, it does have a real usefulness. Because it requires transparency in fiscal management, (revenues, international aid..), it enables Liberia to receive funds, and will enable it in future to lift the current embargos (notably on diamonds)

The rehabilitation of the Justice sector and the end of the "culture of impunity" is also necessary in order to end corruption. Today, the judicial system remains very fragile and if it cannot judge these "economic crimes", it will be very difficult to end corruption and give the Liberian government the credibility it needs.

II. The political reconciliation

A. The weight of the opposition: a hostile legislative power

Besides the challenges of the reconstruction of the country, and despite the efforts made to ensure that all parties would be represented in her government, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has to cope with a particularly hostile legislative power. Indeed, the governing party – the Unity Party (UP)- has only 8 seats out of the 64 at the Parliament, and 3 out of 3012 at the Senate. The composition of Parliament and Senate is made of dozens of small parties, so there is no majority party.

For some, the dispersal of power between the President, the Senate and the Parliament can only lead to a dead end. However, the UN's Secretary-General said in a report that relationships between executive and legislative powers have improved, which facilitates the passing of laws and reforms in some sectors of economy.

Moreover, every time the population is dissatisfied, particularly about life conditions, the opposition uses it against the government. The population's hopes and the confidence in Ellen Johnson Sirleaf remain very strong but the reconstruction process is long and difficult, and optimism may quickly disappear if improvements are not made soon.

B. Rebel movements pacified?

1. From war to integration of the rebel movements in the Government

Between 1983 and 2003, more than a dozen rebel factions appeared and took part, at different levels, in the atrocities of the war. Moreover, war leaders were key elements of the political life in Liberia. In 1997, Charles Taylor was elected President because the population feared an increase in violence. In fact, despite two years of a relative respite, civil war started again and the looting of the country's resources –especially to support the rebel factions- brought Liberia further down into poverty.

Integrating ex-war leaders and rebel movements in the political process was a very delicate issue. However, collaborating with the perpetrators of these particularly violent crimes seemed to be the only way to ease tensions. According to the Peace Agreement signed in Accra in 2003, the National Transitional Government was formed by representatives of the three parties in conflict (the two rebel factions LURD and MODEL, and the representatives of Charles Taylor's government). Despite accusations of corruption and bad conduct of public affairs, this government has been able, to some extent and with the support of the UN, to progress in building peace, particularly when it organised the 2005 elections.

2. Breaking with the past: rebel factions no longer in the government

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf promised she would form a government of technocrats, open to the opposition. Because her goal is to establish a government of national unity, the current government no longer has representatives of the former rebel forces.

In general, the rebel forces didn't become political forces, even if some representatives of these forces have been elected to the Senate. This is the case of Prince Johnson who was elected in the County of Nimba, where the diamond mines are situated. Former leader of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL, born out of the separation of Charles Taylor's rebel faction in 1990), he is responsible for the torture and assassination of President Doe (1990).

C. Ethnic distribution

1. The conflict originated from ethnical tensions

The conflict in Liberia results from the historical division between two groups: the "Americano-Liberians", descendants of black freed slaves, and the "Natives".

The Americano-Liberians governed the country since the independence in 1847 until 1980. Between 1944 and 1971, efforts were made to reduce economic, social and political inequalities between the two groups. However, all these efforts were destroyed during the dictatorship and the civil conflict. In 1980, a coup led by Samuel Doe brought him to power, and he became the first "Native" at the head of Liberia. He established a dictatorship and political and military elites were dominated by members of Doe's ethnicity, the Krahn. Power went from one group to another but it did not improve the population's life conditions, and violations of Human rights against the other minorities carried on.

The successive governments reproduced this model, the political and social elite going from one ethnic group to another. A period of unrest started in 1989. In 1997, war leader Charles Taylor (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) was elected President. He also used ethnic tensions to establish his power, and contributed in dividing even more the ethnic groups.

Main Ethnic Groups

Indigenous Africans ("Natives") represent 95% of the population (including Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Grebo, Mano, Krahn, Gola, Gbandi, Loma, Kissi, Vai, Dei, Bella, Mandingo, and Mende)

Americano-Liberians (descendants of immigrants from the US and the Caribbean who were slaves), represent 5% of the population.

Source: World Factbook
US Central Intelligence Agency

2. Could some appropriate the situation for political ends?

Today, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's government seems to have gone past the rebel factions' divergences and the ethnic issues that caused tensions and conflicts in Liberia. Her objective is clearly to build national unity, and to establish political reconciliation. This is why she tried to gather within the government every political and ethnic tendency.

In 2005, more than 100,000 fighters were disarmed, but the success of the reintegration programmes is very limited. Moreover, it must be pointed out that security in Liberia is mainly ensured by Blue Helmets, deployed all over Liberia, and under UNMIL's authority. In front of such a fragile security, we must remain cautious about the risks of tensions

between ethnies and the possibility that someone appropriates the situation for political ends.

Conclusion

Despite major advances in terms of political consolidation, economic reconstruction and national reconciliation, there are still some important challenges to overcome and the situation in Liberia remains fragile. Support from the International Community, at economic and political levels, and regarding security, is still fundamental in order to carry on with the complex process of peace consolidation.