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Democracy Is The System of Government That Surpasses all Others - Says President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

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Georgetown, U.S.A. – Wednesday, December 6, 2017:

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf says democracy is the system of government that surpasses all others; grounded in rule-of-law, respect for individual and human rights, and for institutions, which can arbitrate between competing political interests on behalf of the people.

According to a dispatch from the U.S. the Liberian leader was speaking on Wednesday, December 6, 2017 at Georgetown University during a forum on the theme: ***“Women’s Political Leadership in Africa: The Next Generation”***.

Addressing the gathering, President Sirleaf said: “I accepted this invitation months ago, believing that Liberia’s historic 2017 elections, an event marking the first time since 1944 that presidential authority would be transferred democratically from one elected leader to another, would have been completed. It has not. In fact, it has become more complicated, but that is the nature of a post conflict democracy.”



She recalled that in the past, close to twelve years of her Presidency, she promoted democracy, protected fundamental freedom and encouraged an open society. President Sirleaf said there were many times when she wondered if she had it right; if under the circumstances of a war-torn country like Liberia, there were alternatives that would lead to more civic responsibility and accelerated development.

President Sirleaf averred that “Yet democracy, as we all know, can be messy. It can be unpredictable. Recent cases in point are Liberia, Kenya, Zimbabwe and even the United States. As many of you may know, no one candidate running in Liberia’s October 10th presidential election was able to meet the threshold required by our constitution to secure a victory. As such, a run-off election was required.

The Liberian Chief Executive informed her audience that the first-round election results were challenged by three contesting political parties through formal procedures as defined under Liberia’s electoral law. As a result, the Supreme Court placed a stay order on the presidential run-off.”

She said since that time, the National Elections Commission (NEC) conducted hearings and finally ruled that there was no systematic fraud in the first-round election, and that the run-off election should proceed. The Supreme Court is now deliberating an appeal of the challenging parties to this decision - although in the meanwhile anxiety amounts as Liberians await a decision.

“So today, we find ourselves still in the electoral period. Liberia has yet to decide who its next leader will be, but this is a decision that belongs to the people and the people alone. And I maintain full confidence that our institutions are working to ensure the integrity of the process. A technical team from the Economic Community of West Africa States is now in country to assess the results of the first round and provide technical assistance to NEC to strengthen their capacity for the run-off,” she pointed out.

President Sirleaf noted that Liberians are watching democracy play out in a compelling demonstration that the institutions we have built following 30 years of conflict are strong and resilient. These institutions – she assured, are laying the foundation for our next generation of democratically elected leaders. President Sirleaf said: “It is worth noting, and applauding, that during this time of uncertainty, almost two months now, there has not been a single act of violence. While partisan rhetoric has been heated, the Liberian people have remained patient and calm.”

She indicated: “It is clear that the ballot box has replaced bullets and electoral disputes are settled through the courts. I take pride as a woman in the fact that this transformation has taken place under my leadership. I wish that I could say more about this ongoing experience but as the matter is before the Court, I will focus the remainder of my remarks on women’s political participation in Africa: the progress we have made, and the challenges that remain.”

Focusing on the theme, President Sirleaf said African women have made great strides - expanding their roles in political participation at virtually all levels of government. This, she noted is certainly worth noting and worth celebrating. “Over the course of the last 20 years, sub-Saharan Africa has boasted some of the most dramatic breakthroughs in women’s political representation in national legislative bodies. According to the Brookings Institution, the number of female legislators on the continent grew from 9.8 percent in 1995 to 23.2 percent in 2016. In comparison, Europe, excluding the Nordic nations, comes in at 24.3 percent and the Americas at 27.7 percent,” she underscored.

She reminded the forum that - at the national level, five of the world’s top 15 countries for the number of women serving in parliament are found in Africa. “Rwanda, under the leadership of President Paul Kagame, stands out with the highest ratio at 61 percent, followed by South Africa, Senegal, Namibia and Mozambique. Eight African countries have parliaments with more than 30% female membership,” she historicized.

These numbers, President Sirleaf observed - taken at face value, show 22 African countries outperforming more developed countries across the globe, including the United States, where the current Congress is composed of less than 20 percent women. She said in Liberia’s October 10th elections, an unprecedented number of women ran for political office, including one presidential candidate and six vice presidential candidates. “This is significant progress for women’s leadership in Liberia but, admittedly, much more remains to be done both in my country and across Africa,” she highlighted.

According to President Sirleaf, the growing number of women in political leadership roles across the continent is, partially, a result of deliberate policy decisions supported and sometimes demanded by civil society. In response, at least 16 countries have parity legislation and quota systems in place. But, it is becoming increasingly evident that top-down legal and constitutional changes will be insufficient on their own in the long run to bring the equality that women seek.

On a number of questions for all of us to consider; she reckoned: “Do these increased strides represent a true rise in the power of women in national decision making? Is such progress, fundamental and sustainable, or superficial and temporary”?

Interestingly, President Sirleaf alluded to a 2016 McKinsey and Company report: “Women Matter Africa, found an increased number of women in legislative bodies and cabinet positions do not necessarily translate to greater political influence. Approximately half of female cabinet ministers hold social welfare portfolios, with arguably limited political influence and no direct path towards top leadership roles. African women ministers are half as likely as their male peers to be appointed to influential portfolios. This limits the redistribution of real political power.”

Said President Sirleaf: “I, as Head of State, have had my own limitations. As of 6th December, 2017, we have not passed the Domestic Violence Laws due to the battle with the Legislature who continue to view the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as a valid cultural practice. Admittedly, I am running out of time, but will continue to work with the many progressive men of the Legislature to pass this law before the end of my Administration. That is my promise.”

Regarding why do we continue to face limitations; President Sirleaf said there are many reasons, but for her, there are two, which stand out. First, women, by definition, are generally political outsiders in Africa. They represent change, greater democracy and transparency. She intimated that although women at all levels continue to find their voices, we are still regarded as a threat to the status quo.

Second, political party structures continue to be hierarchical, and based upon patronage and patriarchy. This must change. There must be a global effort to ensure that women have access to resources and networks required to propel them to positions of power in government. A 2011 United Nations General Assembly resolution aptly reads, “Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women.”

“Statistics can paint an incomplete picture, leading us to believe that we should conceptualize political leadership in vertical manner –as a ladder that men and women ascend. Today, I would like to invite you to challenge that image. We must reach beyond counting and analyzing the few women at the highest levels of politics and transition into building and sustaining a strong and well-resourced horizontal bench for the next generation of leaders,” she stressed.

President Sirleaf said “This horizontal bench should exist across a wider cross-section of society and address the multifaceted challenges and social norms which marginalize women, stifling both their voices and their potential. This should start at the grassroots level with reinforced regulations and institutions, which codify and uphold the rights of women and girls.”

She argued that the stage to empower women’s political participation begins when households and communities denounce the subordination of women, when the girl child is entitled to the same educational opportunities as her brother. She maintained that there is much to be done in Liberia in this regard, but added she was glad that today, in even the remotest village a woman will stand up in a Town Hall Meeting and say “Thank you, Madam President, I now have a voice in decision making. I am glad that a little girl can challenge her marginalization on the basis that a woman is President.”

President Sirleaf concluded as saying: “In a few weeks, in compliance with the constitution, I will hand over leadership to another democratically elected president, which for Liberia, will be first time in 74 years. It is an example I hope my African contemporaries will follow. I will leave behind a nation transformed from despair to hope; from a destroyed nation, to one with a functional government and an open democratic society from a pariah state to a post conflict success story. Many of you in this room played a part in this transformation and I thank you.”

The occasion was graced by former U.S. Ambassador to Liberia - Linda Thomas-Greenfield, former Minister of Finance, Ms. Antoinette Monsio Sayeh, longtime colleague - Steve Radelet, Georgetown University family, members of Liberia’s Mission in Washington, among others.





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