

## **Gedeo, Linus T. (2012): Reporting Liberia 2012. 2012 in review.**

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When the postwar history of Liberia on economic development and politics is written, several chapters will be reserved for the year 2012. The negotiation and renegotiation of Liberia's newly discovered oil contracts and the fight within; accusations of nepotism and the Nobel Laureates' split; legislative gluttony and the civil servants all seized the major headlines pages of 2012 in the print and electronic media and discussion centers around the country. Volumes would definitely be needed to chronicle the truths, the progress and successes. Volumes would also certainly be needed to record the fabrications, the hypocrisies, the sycophancy and the egocentricity in high places of the year. This is definitely only an outline and summary of the voluminous issues that shaped media and public focus in 2012.

It is now public knowledge that the deep waters of Liberia contain crude oil. This discovery was received with extreme excitement by ordinary Liberians and just tiny bits of caution by the critical minds considering the fact that in other parts of the world, the mismanagement of the natural resource has been a source of conflicts. Although the study has not determined the commercial quantity of the oil, 2012 witnessed barrage of negotiations with either the executive branch of government and investors or the House of Representatives and investors expressing interest in purchasing oil blocks. The resounding question remains in whose interest will these oil concessions be consummated? Will there be a break from the obnoxious past of some decision makers subjecting national interest to personal amassing of wealth? The headlines thus far spell gloom for national interest. There have been headlines about individual law makers either fronting for investors or expressing interest to own oil blocks for themselves. Headlines about negotiations, cancellations or re-negotiations all resulting from defense of individual interests for oil block allocations have also found their way to the front pages of 2012.

Many thanks to finger pointing press conferences, behind the dark curtains oil deals have come to the fore. A member of the House of Representatives, Mr. Edwin Melvin Snowe called a press conference accusing the son of the President, Mr. Robert Sirleaf who serves as the Board Chairman for the National Oil Company of massive siphoning of public funds and corruption in the entity. Mr. Snowe did not hide his intention when he angrily noted he also wants to own an oil block to be rich. In defense Mr. Sirleaf disclosed the reason behind the rather angry press conference of Mr. Snowe who came to prominence during the regime of former president Charles Taylor and is accused of gathering wealth from the regime. He confessed that the representative had sought an audience with him and his mother along with his Russian partner. He further narrated that when Mr. Snowe could not get the cordial reception and attention for him and his Russian guest he realized his interest was not favored and irritably left the scene. The question remains, how many such discussions of personal interests have succeeded?

Mr. Robert Sirleaf, son of the president and Board Chairman of the National Oil Company and also economic advisor to the president; Mr Charles Sirleaf, son of the president and Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Liberia and Mr. Fumba Sirleaf, son of the president and head of the National Security Agency (NSA). Month after month in 2012, street-side discussion centers and the media did not cease to accuse the president for blatantly instituting nepotism today when she vehemently opposed same in past regimes by appointing her sons to high profile lucrative jobs. The 2011 Nobel Laureate, president Sirleaf's defense that her sons are all well qualified for said jobs and cannot deprive them the right to work has done nothing to change public opinion on the basis that her opposition before was for equally well qualified relatives of past regimes. Co-winner of the 2011 Nobel Prize, Miss Leymah Gbowee whom the president appointed as chair of the reconciliation committee few weeks after they both won the Nobel prize publicly aired her disenchantments with the president over international wires. Among other things, she also accused madam president of nepotism and resigned her position.

I switched on my radio on the morning of June 7, 2012 hoping to get a statement of defense from the president or her sons about the incessant accusations about nepotism but on the contrary I sadly heard this: "I work for government and don't have money to pay my children's school fees. I cannot afford to purchase necessary things for my upkeep. What is that? All we hear is increase in lawmakers' personal benefits with little or no interest for civil servants that do most of the work in government. We are tired and will be here all day and every day until they can address our concern." Those were the grave words of one of the civil servants staging a demonstration at the doorsteps of the House of Representatives. The lawmakers had just passed the 2012/2013 budget raising their already fabulous salaries currently over US\$7,000 monthly plus huge benefits including hundreds of gas coupons for their vehicles in an economy where the majority struggles to survive living under 1\$ per day. The civil servants were disappointed that with no more than a taxable US\$175 salary per month, the lawmakers could not be rational to increase theirs. She described the lawmakers as heartless and accused them of being extremely gluttonous.

There was a massive public outcry about the decision of the lawmakers. There were several appeals to have them rescind their decision for the huge increment in the face of mass abject poverty and the lack of basic social services for the majority. Unfortunately they insisted to divert tax payers and donors' money into their pockets rather than sign up for improved road networks, available and affordable electricity and improving the livelihood of the poor. They even took offense when the president informed international press when the question of the huge increment was raised and she clearly said the lawmakers unilaterally made the decision. They asked that she equally publically apologize for the remark or face lack of cooperation. She refused and this became another topic for the public for few months in 2012. With the involvement of the national traditional council, the matter was resolved but with no public apology from the president as the lawmakers demanded.

While vast majority of Liberians slips deeper into abject poverty; still go to bed hungry and have no apparent reasons to thank 2012, others will remember the year as bringing them fortune. I asked an old man in his mid-70s his assessment of the year. He smiled and nodded his head. "I am old now and as you can see I cannot walk. I sit here day after day by my radio and it makes me very sad that this country, generation after generation; leaders after leaders, all that I heard and saw as a boy that has kept us poor and undeveloped with all the natural resources, I still hear and see as an old man. The extreme love for self then nation or the poor by leaders; the deceit and the sycophancy robbed this nation before and again robbed it in 2012. More money flew from the nation into private accounts. But I thank God for the peace. This is the only good thing I remember that happened in 2012." He paused for a while and then asked for my opinion about the year. I admitted I shared his feelings and thoughts and was only troubled that the future of Liberia has always bear a resemblance to the ugly past. When will this end?