

Linus T. Gedeo (2013): Reporting Liberia. International Goodwill - Will It Follow Ellen Or Stay With Liberia?

As the constitutional mandate of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf slowly vanishes with time and no possibility of a third term, few chapters of history are torturing me with fear, especially with no clear alternative in sight for her replacement.

It is certainly no question, no argument and no doubts that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been the honey of the International Community. When many Liberians were still frowning on her role as one of the financiers of the bloody brutal civil war, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; when many accused her government of benefitting only family and cronies, the widely read news magazine Newsweek named her among the "ten best leaders in the world in 2010". The Global Economic magazine called her "The best president Liberia has ever had". United States decorated and honored her with "The Presidential Medal of Freedom", America's highest civilian award. France's highest award of public distinction, the "Grand Croix of the Légion d'Honneur", was also bestowed on her. Billions of dollars of financial goodwill from these governments keep coming to support her developmental initiatives.

Many accuse the government of unprecedented flexibility in negotiating and awarding concessions apparently dancing to the whims of her international friends against the interest of locals in exchange for the magnanimity and accolades. Flipping Liberia's political pages backwards, President Sirleaf's regime bears complete similitude to the Tubman's era, which spanned twenty-seven continuous years of leadership.

Now it is becoming clear why President William Tubman lasted so long without any form of instability. In an effort to understanding a lot about the Tubman's presidency to assist with my comparison with Ellen's, I visited my good old friend, well now in his late 70s, with vivid knowledge about President Tubman's regime. My question to him was why did Tubman rule so long? My friend disclosed, "An insider told me that America told Tubman, you form, control and manage your domestic policy and leave your international policy to us. The rest before you have kept this rule!" My old friend smiled and continued, "And Tubman never broke this rule of engagement until he got sick and died a natural death". He recalled how the biggest American investment, the Firestone Rubber Plantation ill-treated workers under the watchful eyes of the regime and benefitted 100% tax weaver on a land replacing one million acres of farm and habitable land with rubber for the American and European markets. Following his inauguration on January 4 1944, Tubman in World War II declared war on Germany and Japan. German merchants despite running the economy at the time and Germany being Liberia's major trading partner, and most medical doctors being Germans, were expelled. As if a precondition for history making, later the same year Tubman visited the White House at the invitation of President Franklin Roosevelt making history as the first African President to receive the invitation.

Tubman's era was characterized by influx of foreign investments, mostly Americans. This coupled with his straight adherence to the rules of engagements in internatio-

nal politics certainly accounted for twenty-seven years of stable rule.

His successor, President William R. Tolbert, a renowned Baptist Preacher, probably wanting to practice what he preached on Sunday morning, chose to abandon Tubman's pro-west foreign policy and rather pursued Liberia's political independence. Locally he zoomed on foreign investments, revisiting their concession agreements to clearly benefit the Liberian people. The biggest American investment Firestone Rubber Plantation was for the first time audited and made to pay millions of dollars in back taxes. The wealth of Liberia was now seen to benefit Liberians and not shipped away with no returns. Several industries were operational and mechanized farming was even started under his regime.

On the international scene, he morphed Liberia's traditional position of being sympathetic to Israel and recognized the rights of Palestine in the conflict. Only about eight years into his regime, then came the bloody rice riot that many refer to as the beginning of Liberia's trouble to last over fifteen years. What caused the riot? Exactly one year later than another.

In early April 1979, Tolbert's government proposed an increase in the subsidized price of rice, the country's staple food from \$22 per 100-pound bag to \$26. The government asserted that the increase would serve as an added inducement for rice farmers to stay on the land and produce rice as both a subsistence crop and a cash crop instead of abandoning their farms for jobs in the cities or on the rubber plantations. This was opposed and spiked the riot.

Bloodshed on 12th April 1980, this time a military coup staged by seventeen low ranking members of the army headed by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe that saw President Tolbert killed. His thirteen cabinet ministers were publically executed.

The implausibility of such low ranking soldiers mustering the audacity to plan, stage and successfully executing the plans has attracted several conspiracy theories. The first Minister of Justice in the military government disclosed at the National Truth and Reconciliation hearing, it was a white American CIA agent that provided the map of the Executive Mansion. In her autobiography, the wife of the late president remembered seeing a white hand with masked face stabbing her husband.

Whether the theories are full truths, half-truths or no truths at all, it cannot be argued that America was pleased about April 12th, 1980 overthrow.

Barely two years after the blood-stained coup, Sergeant Samuel Doe was invited to the White House by President Ronald Reagan. During the visit, Doe received rapturous welcome by Reagan and made to inspect the American Guard of Honor although he was referred to as Chairman Doe and not President Doe by Reagan.

Amidst charges of human rights abuses and rampant corruption, President Doe's undemocratic regime was the largest per capita recipient of United States aid in Sub-Saharan Africa between 1980 and 1985. Many still believe the aid stopped since Doe was now unpopular with the American when he willfully rigged the 1985 elections in his favor. Some too still believe that with the declining communist threat and waning down of the cold-war, America was now embarrassed with the entrenched corruption and tribalism in Doe's regime

Only four years later in 1989, the deadly nightmare arrived and saw Doe brutally tortured and killed.

Conspiracy theories here too point to the Americans, especially considering that a prisoner at the United States Plymouth County jail, named Charles Taylor was said to escape the well manned facility to turn out a rebel leader in Liberia. Hundreds of thousands of Liberians lost their precious lives and the country has still not been able to reach its pre-war status ten years after the end of the war. This speaks volume of infrastructural destruction the Taylor led war added to the human casualty.

Whether the conspiracy is full truth, half-truth or still no truth at all, these important pages of history revealed two key points to remember:

- i. Leaders of Liberia that enjoyed undisrupted tenure of office, huge financial support and goodwill from the international community led by the United States of America, compromise their independence on international policies and foreign investments.
- ii. Leaders that neglect the rules of engagement do not survive another opportunity and years of instability characterize by wanton destruction of innocent lives and properties replace them.

This is exactly my fear. Ellen follows Tubman and we are feeling the warmth of the international community. Like Tubman's era, the influx of foreign investments has grown to a record high and still counting. Liberia's 4.9 billion debt has been cancelled. The United Nations still maintains peace keepers, even ten years after the war and the country is stable.

Several other indicators of international community's affection for President Sirleaf and ensuring that nothing disrupts her tenure are visible.

Unfortunately Madam President constitutionally stands no chance of serving another presidential term come twenty-seventeen. What if the next president follows Tolbert? Will the international community and all of the stability and goodwill it currently maintains and exhibits follow Ellen or stay with Liberia?...

This report was written on September 13th.