

# **In First for Africa, Woman Wins Election as President of Liberia**

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DAKAR, Senegal, Nov. 11 - Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a Harvard-educated economist and former World Bank official who waged a fierce presidential campaign against the soccer star George Weah, emerged victorious on Friday in her quest to lead war-torn [Liberia](#) and become the first woman elected head of state in modern African history.

"Everything is on our side," said Morris Dukuly, a spokesman for Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf. "The voters have chosen a new and brighter future."

With 97 percent of the runoff vote counted on Friday, Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf achieved an insurmountable lead with 59 percent, compared with Mr. Weah's 41 percent, in a nation where women make up more than half the electorate.

Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf's victory propels her into an old boys' club unlike any other. From the Cape to Cairo, from Dar es Salaam to Dakar, men have dominated African politics from the earliest days of the anticolonial struggle.

"There are so many capable women," said Yassine Fall, a Senegalese economist and feminist working on women's rights in Africa. "But they just don't get the chance to lead."

Indeed, when supporters of Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf, 66, a onetime United Nations official and Liberian finance minister, marched through the broken streets of Monrovia in the final, frantic days of the campaign for Liberia's presidency, they shouted and waved signs that read, "Ellen - she's our man."

Mr. Dukuly said Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf held off formally declaring victory because Mr. Weah, who won the first round of the election last month and enjoys broad support among Liberia's huge youth population, had alleged that the results were tainted by fraud.

Mr. Weah told reporters in Monrovia that he had submitted a formal complaint to the Supreme Court, which will investigate. International observers said that while there were some minor irregularities, they were too small to change the outcome.

Mr. Weah, speaking Friday to a crowd of supporters at his campaign headquarters, appealed for calm, but hundreds of supporters wielding branches marched through the streets in protest, chanting, "No Weah, no peace!"

They threw stones at police officers in front of the National Elections Commission, and United Nations peacekeepers fired tear gas to keep protesters from storming the United States Embassy, according to Reuters.

Mr. Weah, whose base was the young, discontented population who idolized him for his exploits on the soccer field and his rags-to-riches life story, was seen as a favorite because young voters make up 40 percent of the electorate.

But the women's vote appears to have been stronger. There were slightly more women registered to vote in Liberia, and while there were no reliable surveys of voters leaving the polls, women appeared to be a strong presence.

Political strategy played a role as well. In the final weeks of the campaign, Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf formed crucial alliances with parties whose candidates had lost in the first round, which winnowed the field of 22 presidential contenders to 2.

The impact of her victory went well beyond Liberia, a nation still trying to recover from more than a decade of civil war.

The history of the continent rings with the names of heroes like Kwame Nkrumah, [Nelson Mandela](#) and Jomo Kenyatta, fathers of the modern African states they helped form, and villains like [Mobutu Sese Seko](#), Idi Amin and Sani Abacha, the despotic "big men" who ruled ruthlessly over their subjects, enriching themselves along the way.

Despite the large role women played in many national struggles for independence, they were largely relegated to the sidelines in the post-colonial era. The most ambitious women often went abroad, and some, like Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf, rose to prominence in international organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank.

But in recent years, African women have gained power and visibility. In 2004 a Kenyan environmentalist, Wangari Muta Maathai, won the Nobel Peace Prize, while Nigeria's finance minister and feared corruption fighter, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, has emerged as one of that country's most respected officials.

Women have also made gains at the ballot box. The prime minister of Mozambique, Luísa Dias Diogo, is widely seen as a likely future president. In Rwanda, there is a greater proportion of women serving in Parliament than in any other nation; they occupy nearly half the seats.

Indeed, Africa leads the developing world in the percentage of women in legislative positions, at about 16 percent, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, an organization of parliamentary bodies worldwide.

Yet having more women leaders does not necessarily bring decisions that benefit women. While women generally make decisions that favor women and children, they often gain political power as an embattled minority that feels it must follow men's lead in order to maintain power, said

Geeta Rao Gupta, president of the International Center for Research on Women, a Washington-based research group.

"When there is a critical mass of women leaders, they gain confidence over time and are more likely to exhibit diversity of experience as women in their decisions," Ms. Rao Gupta said. "It takes a few cycles to really sink in."

Liberia's presidential election came two years after the nation emerged from a brutal civil war that claimed more than 200,000 lives and displaced a third of the population. Pushed from power by rebels, [Charles Taylor](#), the warlord who became Liberia's president and fomented bloody wars that racked the region for more than a decade, went into exile in 2003 and is now in Nigeria.

He left behind a nation shattered by war, with the entire infrastructure, from roads to electric wires to water pipes, rotted away or looted. Despite its natural wealth in gems, rubber and timber, Liberia is one of the poorest nations.

Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf, who has been known as Liberia's Iron Lady since she ran against Mr. Taylor for president in 1997 and was jailed for more than a year under the former dictator Samuel Doe, will have no trouble fitting into the all-male club of African heads of state, said Ms. Fall, the economist, who has known her for years.

"She is fearless," Ms. Fall said. "No men intimidate her."

Move to Arrest Ex-Dictator

UNITED NATIONS, Nov. 11 (Reuters) - The Security Council voted unanimously on Friday to authorize peacekeepers to arrest Charles Taylor, the former president, if he returns to Liberia and turn him over to a special tribunal in Sierra Leone.

Mr. Taylor, in exile in Nigeria, was indicted in Sierra Leone in March 2003 on 17 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In addition to calling for Mr. Taylor's arrest, the resolution referred to his stay in Nigeria as temporary, which rights activists said could clear the way for Nigeria to turn him over for trial in Sierra Leone.