The Iron Lady of Liberia

Adekeye Adebajo

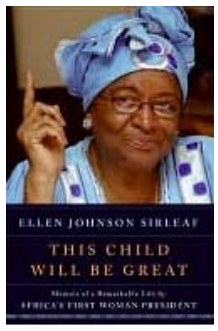
This Child Will Be Great: Memoirs of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President
by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
Harper Collins, 2009, $26.99 hardcover, ISBN: 978-0-06135-348-2

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liberian president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (along with Liberia's Leymah Gbowee and Yemen's Tawakul Karman), for championing women's rights, four days before a presidential election in October 2011, must count as one of the most political acts in the history of the prize. It would be hard to imagine the prize being awarded to a sitting American or European leader less than a week before an election. This act also reinforced the gulf between international perceptions of Liberia's 'Iron Lady' and the more critical view that many Liberians and West Africans have of her six years in office and past political record.

Sirleaf's main opponent in the presidential election, Winston Tubman, argued that Sirleaf did not deserve the Nobel Peace Prize, describing her as a 'warmonger'. In the first round of polling during the October 2011 election, the Liberian president won 43.9 per cent of the vote to Tubman's 32.7 per cent. A run-off was therefore required a month later. In a reckless act of political immaturity, Tubman claimed – without producing much credible evidence – that the first round of voting had been rigged in favour of Sirleaf and called on his supporters to boycott the second round. Violence erupted in Monrovia that led to two deaths and accusations of curbs on media freedom. Sirleaf was thus the sole candidate in the second round, winning the election unopposed. The 38 per cent turn-out in the second round was in stark contrast to the first round's 72 per cent, meaning that the president's legitimacy was likely to remain a perennial source of questioning in a second six-year term. The fact that Sirleaf's Unity Party still lacked a majority of seats in the House and the Senate after legislative elections could also further weaken her ability to rule effectively.

As Liberia's four million citizens ponder the aftermath of this difficult 2011 election, the life and times of their president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, seems a particularly appropriate subject of study. Sirleaf became Africa's first elected female head of state in November 2005. One of Africa's most accomplished technocrats, she has written an engaging memoir that has received surprisingly little review across the continent. It is also noteworthy that Sirleaf delivered the sixth Nelson Mandela Lecture in Johannesburg in July 2008, eulogising the Nobel Peace laureate and praising his successor Thabo Mbeki's vision of an 'African Renaissance'.

The title of the book – *This Child Will Be Great* – is taken from an old man's prophecy, and modesty is certainly not one of Sirleaf's qualities. She talks of growing up with a Gola father who was brought up in an Americo-Liberian household, ended up as a legislator, but then suffered the tragedy of being crippled. Her mother's father was a German trader who had abandoned his family, and Sirleaf's mother grew up with an Americo-Liberian family. Both parents were thus brought up culturally Americo-Liberian and the author refers incessantly to individuals from 'settler' families, contrasting these with what she describes as a 'largely docile, uneducated population of young natives' that would later become 'radicalized'. The Americo-Liberians were a group of freed American slaves who founded the republic of Liberia in 1847 and systematically oppressed and marginalised the indigenous population, while mimicking the culture of their homeland. This corrupt oligarchy ruled for 133 years until a bloody *coup d'état* in 1980 led by a semi-literate Master-Sergeant, Samuel Doe, seized power after killing several members of the *ancien régime*.



Sirleaf attended elite schools and was a 'tomboy' who enjoyed sports. Her fellow pupils teased her mercilessly, referring to her as 'Red Pumpkin' due to her light skin. This led to a defensiveness about her identity that is evident in her memoir. At the tender age of 17, she married a man whose mother was from a prominent Americo-Liberian family, and had four sons with him. She worked as a bookkeeping assistant to an accountant, and when her husband went to study in the United States, she had a chance to enrol herself at Madison Business College. Sirleaf talks of her guilt at having left her sons with family members as she travelled the world, noting the lingering strain on this bond. The relationship with her children enjoys notably little attention in the book, and some reviewers of this memoir have complained about a lack of emotional as opposed to historical content. Sirleaf is close to her devout Christian mother and writes touchingly about her. She, however, makes the rather odd comment that her mother 'was very fair and did not much look like an African' – a narrow definition of Africanness that again suggests serious identity issues on the part of the author. Sireleaf's efforts to identify with rural women – based seemingly on sporadic visits to the village as a child – are therefore not totally convincing.

Johnson Sirleaf left her husband when he became increasingly abusive, and the unflattering picture she paints of him is of a philandering, jealous, ill-tempered alcoholic. She admits to having had an affair with an unnamed 'good friend' that lasted until his death, but she never remarried. Sirleaf joined Liberia's finance ministry and enjoyed a meteoric rise, particularly after obtaining a masters degree in public administration from Harvard University where she learned a lot about her country while devouring the vast literature in the institution's well-stacked libraries. Though a civil servant, Sirleaf famously criticised government corruption at a conference on Liberia in the US in 1969. She, however, lazily described the 27-year rule of William Tubman (1944-1971) in oxymoronic terms as a 'benevolent dictatorship'. She became deputy minister of finance under the successor regime of William Tolbert, and used a graduation speech in 1972 to criticise the Americo-Liberian settler – class of which she was a *de facto* member – for its political and cultural hegemony over indigenous Liberians, warning of increasing socio-political tensions. This stunning lack of judgment was repeated several times in Sirleaf's career, and it would surely have been more sensible either to make private criticisms to push for reform from inside the system or to resign from the government and then go public. In reading this memoir, one cannot help thinking sometimes that Sirleaf suffers from a *folie de grandeur* in which she is a gallant anti-corruption crusader single-handedly trying to save her volatile country from erupting into chaos.

Increasingly sidelined in the Tolbert administration, Sirleaf joined the World Bank in 1973, travelling to East Africa as well as to Latin America and the Caribbean, thus greatly expanding her horizons. She showed a consistently impressive determination to succeed, to master her brief and improve herself, and her capacity for hard work is beyond doubt. Though she criticised the arrogance of the bank officials in dealing with leaders of developing countries, she showed less courage in speaking out against the patronizing of the Third World in this international setting than she had done in her own domestic environment. Sirleaf returned home to the finance ministry in 1975. In another astonishing lack of judgment, she stamped 'BULLSHIT' on a request from Liberia's finance minister to the query of a British contractor, with the story appearing in the *Financial Times* and embarrassing the government.

Sirleaf was made finance minister in August 1979, eight months before the Doe coup. Inexplicably, she agreed to work for a regime – as president of the Liberian Bank for Development and Investment – that had killed 13 senior officials (including six of her former cabinet colleagues) as well as the president she had served. She curiously described her relationship with Doe as at first 'complex but workable' before souring. Sirleaf again criticised the regime she served, this time during a lecture in the US in November 1980, before returning to the World Bank. In a telling exchange, she sides with the World Bank president, Robert McNamara, after criticisms by renowned Kenyan academic Ali Mazrui that the American was portraying himself as Africa's saviour.

Sirleaf then becomes the first African female vice-president of Citibank, based in Kenya, but travelling across Africa. In true diva style, she clearly revelled in the 'good life', living in a 'big home' in Nairobi's 'Beverly Hills' with 'chauffeured car, domestic servants'. She employs the royal 'we' throughout the book to describe herself. During visits to Liberia, Sirleaf continued to pay 'courtesy calls' on the autocratic Samuel Doe, who she says had a lot of affection for me and even trusted me'. In another loss of judgment that occurred twice, Sirleaf joins a political party while working at Citibank, later acknowledging that she should have resigned first. When she was trying to win a party nomination for presidential elections in 1997, she also had to be pushed by her employer to resign as head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Africa after reports emerged in the media that she was running for office.

Sirleaf referred in another critical speech in the US in 1984 to Doe's regime as 'idiots' (a loaded term significantly never used to describe the country's Americo-Liberian rulers). Predictably, this landed her in detention on her return to Liberia, as an insecure Doe became increasingly paranoid. She was sentenced to ten years hard labour. Following international pressure, she was released and won a seat in the Liberian Senate in 1985 which she refused to take up in protest at the fraudulent US-backed election that had led to Doe's staying in power. Following a failed coup attempt in the same year, she was jailed again, and her unwavering faith and indomitable courage which earned her the nickname of the 'Iron Lady of Liberia' come through clearly during these trials and tribulations. She was released from prison, but still continued to advise Doe, submitting a policy memo to him before escaping abroad after her passport had been seized. She worked for Equator Bank in the US, travelling often to Asia.

In the biggest misjudgement of Sirleaf's career (and one that clearly still haunts her), she helped raise $10,000 to support Charles Taylor's rebel movement which launched a military incursion to oust Doe in

December 1989 (Taylor later claimed that Sirleaf had been the international coordinator of his movement between 1986 and 1994). She then went to visit the warlord in his bush hideout in 1990. As a civil war was destroying the country with huge human costs (an estimated 250,000 people were eventually killed), Sirleaf flippantly told a BBC reporter that if Taylor destroyed Monrovia, it would be rebuilt and champagne would be drunk. She later described these as some of the most 'stupid' public statements she had ever made.

Sirleaf criticised the historical American economic exploitation of Liberia, but yet she was widely perceived as president, as seeking to remain close to Washington. Even her book often seems aimed – with its language and subjects – at an American audience. She reflected the naïve view of the Liberian settler elite that the US is 'our great father, our patron saint. It will never let us suffer'. After the outbreak of the Liberian civil war (1989-1997), Sirleaf had called for an American intervention – which never materialised – and criticised the Economic Community of West African States Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) arguing, without any evidence and contrary to all military logic, that the force could have ended the fighting in Liberia much earlier. Her portrayal of ECOMOG is rather unflattering, considering the incredible sacrifices (over 500 fatalities) involved during seven years of lonely peacekeeping which saved many Liberian lives. Even after the conflict restarted in 1999, continuing until 2003, Sirleaf was still flying to Washington D.C. to lobby for a more active American role in Liberia. As president, she is frank about having bowed to American pressure to push for Taylor to be handed over from Nigerian exile in June 2006 to stand trial in the Hague for alleged war crimes committed in Sierra Leone. She simultaneously notes that she would have preferred to have focused on other priorities and not to have disturbed her country's fragile peace. As most African governments opposed the presence of a US military Africa Command on their territory, Sirleaf again displayed her obsessive fatal attraction to Uncle Sam. She uniquely called for the command to be located in her country, again opportunistically and short-sightedly demonstrating greater faith in placing her security in American arms rather than in Liberian institutions.

While campaigning against Charles Taylor in presidential elections in 1997, Sirleaf was seen as elitist and out of touch with the concerns of ordinary Liberians. This election resulted in a crushing defeat, and she won only 9.5 per cent of the vote, with Taylor triumphant in a landslide 75 per cent victory. Liberians overwhelmingly voted for peace, judging the former warlord's victory as their best guarantor of future stability. Sirleaf did not accept the defeat gracefully, telling former US president Jimmy Carter before the poll that it would have to be rigged in order for Taylor to win – an extraordinary lack of graciousness and commitment to the rules of the democratic game. In a further sign of pettiness, Sirleaf refused to take Taylor's call after his victory and failed to attend his presidential inauguration.

The fact that Sirleaf could muster only 20 per cent of the vote (coming in second to former footballer, George Weah, who won 28 per cent of the ballots) in the first round of the presidential elections in 2005, also suggested that Liberians were still unsure about her, despite Sirleaf's winning about 60 per cent of the vote in the second round. She immodestly described her victory as representing the 'rebirth of a nation', later noting that the country was lucky to have the opportunity to consolidate its democracy 'largely because of my own extensive contacts', and suggesting that she had been born with leadership qualities.

Many of Sirleaf's critics, however, disagreed with her somewhat messianic approach to leadership. In July 2009, Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (with a vocal dissenting minority) recommended barring Sirleaf – along with 49 other people – from holding public office for 30 years due to her support for Charles Taylor at the start of the Liberian civil war in 1989. Though Liberia's Supreme Court declared this recommendation to be unconstitutional in January 2011, Sirleaf's allies had sought to demonise and discredit the commission. They thus damaged the fragile process of reconciliation in a reckless act of spitefulness similar to Sirleaf's vengeful reactions to her political opponents.

Under the leadership of the 73-year old Sirleaf, Liberia, however, has made some impressive progress in its post-conflict reconstruction efforts. By 2010, the country's external debt of $5.8 billion had been largely forgiven through her incredible energy and prodigious networking. An estimated $16 billion in direct foreign investments has flowed in, involving a sensible diversification of investors, with the Chinese a particularly significant new presence. Some infrastructure has been repaired. An inherited budget of $80 million has quadrupled. 'Ghost workers' have been purged from ministerial payrolls, saving about $3 million a year. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also noted that all of the government's monetary and fiscal targets had been met by December 2010.

One of Sirleaf's persistent fears has been that young unemployed groups will be recruited by warlords to restart the country's civil war that raged for 11 years until 2003. The 8,000-strong UN mission in Liberia (UNMIL) continues to guarantee security in the country amidst continuing ethnic and religious tensions and a weak police force. The international presence will, however, clearly not remain indefinitely. Instability across the border in Côte d'Ivoire also continues to be a serious concern following post-election violence in the neighbouring country in 2011. Liberian mercenaries were involved in this conflict which spilled 160,000 Ivorian refugees into Liberia. Guinea also remained politically unstable (with 3,000 refugees spilling into Liberia by 2011), even as Sierra Leone continued its fragile recovery from a decade of civil war. Liberia was thus located at the epicentre of a volatile Mano River basin.

The problems inherited by Sirleaf's administration clearly overwhelmed even her own incredible determination to succeed. Former combatants were not being provided with jobs quickly enough, leading to instability and crime. In a devastating blow, Sirleaf's American 'godfather' criticised continued failures to tackle corruption in a 2010 State Department report. Even more devastatingly for Sirleaf's declared 'zero-tolerance' approach to corruption, the Berlin-based Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometre (based on the general public's views about corruption levels and their government's efforts to tackle it) named Liberia the most corrupt country in the world in December 2010. Sirleaf had to fire her information minister as well as her internal affairs minister following reports of corruption. The fact that her brother was the internal affairs minister dismissed for graft and her son a presidential adviser, also replicated the nepotism she had earlier criticised in the Tolbert administration.

With no legislative majority to work with, Sirleaf admitted that she could not afford to alienate this branch of government through an anti-corruption crusade if she wanted to pass crucial legislation. Damaging reports of the government bribing lawmakers have thus been recurrent. The president's criticisms and firing of the combative auditor-general John Morlu (who completed 40 audits and criticised the president for not taking action against corrupt officials fingered in these reports) and the smear campaign run against him by Sirleaf's associates in the local media, again revealed a ruthlessness that contradicted her rhetorical attacks on the 'debilitating cancer of corruption'. Leaked email revelations in 2007 that Sirleaf's former Public Works minister, Willis Knuckles, had solicited kick-backs and the implication of her brother-in-law as well as her legal adviser in this scandal, caused further embarrassment, as Sirleaf herself publicly admitted. The sacking of House Speaker Edwin Snowe – Taylor's son-in-law who had been a thorn in the president's flesh – in 2007 on embezzling charges further revealed a selective tackling of corruption. Sirleaf dragged her feet before acting against her own associates, like Harry Greaves who was also accused of corruption. She continued to defend finance minister Augustine Ngafuan, who had been criticised by the General Auditing Commission for the disappearance of $1 million in the 2007/2008 budget. Sirleaf would later admit that she had not realised how deep-rooted and pervasive corruption was in the Liberian society, suggesting a naïve and out-of-touch president who had perhaps spent too much time in exile.

In Liberia's historically rubber and mining-dominated economy, un-employment stood at 95 per cent five years into Sirleaf's presidency (only 100,000 people out of a 2.7 million workforce were employed), while foreign aid of $425 million exceeded the country's $370 million annual budget. The fact that many of the socio-economic problems and corruption that Sirleaf criticised throughout her career continued under her own presidency suggested that there were complex, structural issues at play in generating the resources to establish an efficient civil service and political system to reduce the scourge of corruption. The slow pace of change has made Liberians wary of Sirleaf's lofty rhetoric. The controversial election of 2011 will make it difficult for the president to reconcile and reconstruct her fragile nation. The ennobling of Liberia's 'Iron Lady' by the Oslo-based Nobel Peace Prize committee could thus backfire spectacularly.