



LIBERIA ELECTS FIRST FEMALE PRESIDENT IN AFRICA

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In the first election since Liberia's 14-year civil war ended, the country is set to choose a woman as its leader, the first woman ever elected president in Liberia or anywhere in Africa.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a graduate of Harvard University, is poised to become the first woman elected president of an African country, winning 59 percent of the vote in Liberia's first election since the end of its civil war.

Johnson-Sirleaf, a 67-year-old World Bank economist and grandmother, beat former international soccer champion and millionaire George Weah, who once played for Italy's AC Milan and Britain's Chelsea soccer clubs.

Johnson-Sirleaf follows Ruth Perry, who served as Liberia's interim president for nine months from 1996 to 1997.

Weah disputes election results

But Weah and his supporters charge that the election commission rigged the vote in favor of Johnson-Sirleaf, who is older, more experienced and who previously served as the country's finance minister.

"The world is saying this election was free and fair, which is not true," Weah said at a recent news conference.

The 39-year-old Weah is backed by many young people in Liberia who see his youth and international fame as a refreshing change in a country ruined by a series of corrupt leaders.

Although international observers deny Weah's claim, the National Election Commission is investigating and is expected to declare a final result this week.

Africa's 'Iron Ladies'

Among those celebrating Johnson-Sirleaf's apparent victory are women across Africa who see her win as a boost for women on a traditionally male-dominated continent.

Johnson-Sirleaf is one of only a few women who have been able to rise to positions of political power in African nations.

In Zimbabwe, Vice President Joyce Mujuru made a name for herself during the country's liberation struggle in the 1970s. She is now one of President Robert Mugabe's closest advisors.

Nigeria's Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was once vice president of the World Bank and now is known for her campaign to end corruption in the country.

And in Mozambique, Prime Minister Luisa Dias Diogo shares the nickname "Iron Lady" with Johnson-Sirleaf.

"This is the first time the women's movement has clearly indicated to the country that it needs to take seriously the issue of having a female president," said Zambian presidential candidate Edith Nawakwi, about her country's 2006 election, the BBC reported.

Johnson-Sirleaf has said she wants to bring "motherly sensitivity and emotion to the presidency."

Rebuilding Liberia

Whoever comes out ahead in Liberia's final vote count will face a major challenge in rebuilding the country's political and physical infrastructure.

Liberia was once a West African success story. Founded in the early 1800s by emancipated slaves from the United States, Liberia became a main exporter of rubber and other raw materials.

The country also played a critical role in many of America's conflicts and was a staging point for supplying troops during World War II and for the prevention of communism in Africa in the 1980s.

But years of civil war have left the capital city Monrovia in ruins, the city has no running water or electricity and many Liberians are homeless.

Creating stability and fighting poverty will be the keys to success, many say.

"Our country has gotten demonstrably poorer in the last generation," Liberian analyst Francis Nyepon wrote in an editorial in Liberia's Daily Observer.

"Unemployment currently stands at 85 percent, while hundreds of thousands of Liberian refugees still call displacement camps homes, and more than 100,000 ex-combatants, the majority of them children, need to be reintegrated into society," he said.

"With no electricity or safe drinking water for more than a decade, rebuilding our country's shattered infrastructure must be the priority."

-- *Compiled by Kristina Nwazota for NewsHour Extra*

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