

Women are Africa's political hope

Liberia is not the only female success story on this war-scarred continent - women's power there is growing

BY EMIRA WOODS AND LISA VENEKLASEN

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Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf will address a joint session of the U.S. Congress today. This historic honor, bestowed sparingly on international dignitaries, is a fitting tribute for Africa's first democratically elected female president. But Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is not an anomaly.

The African political landscape is being reshaped by women, generating hope for the future of the continent and raising the bar for democracy worldwide.

Few Americans would guess that the country that leads the world in political gender balance is Rwanda, where women make up half of the members of parliament, a development that started in the mid-1990s. South Africa and Mozambique, also high on the list, are both countries with women composing more than 30 percent of their parliaments. This stands in stark contrast to the United States, where women make up only 15 percent of Congress.

African countries also have higher percentages of women in cabinet-level positions. In South Africa, 13 out of 28 are women, and in Rwanda there are nine women to 22 men. In the United States, there are only three women in President George W. Bush's 20-person cabinet.

One big factor in the rise of women's political power in Africa is affirmative action. Governments have set concrete targets for women's participation in political bodies. The newly formed Pan African Parliament has also implemented affirmative-action measures to ensure a minimum of 30 percent representation by women, all of whom have been elected to office in their countries.

But African women's rising power is measured not just in numbers. In Liberia, the same women who bore the brunt of the country's more than two decades of war are the ones leading the struggle for peace and carving out a new economic and political path.

It was the Liberian women who crossed class, ethnic and political lines to organize and sustain marches for peace and change over the past two years. Market sellers, students, farmers, professionals - women from all walks of life - marched daily in drenching rain and searing sun, often with their children on their backs, to demand the exit of their former leader, war criminal Charles Taylor, indicted by a special court in Sierra Leone, and to insist on an end to civil strife. Their efforts ushered in a period of peace that has now lasted more than 2 1/2 years and opened the door to democracy.

After the election last November, when supporters of presidential candidate George Weah disputed the results and marched in the streets - again raising the specter of instability - it was women and leading religious leaders who engaged them in a dialogue and insisted on reconciliation and peace.

Of course, the real test for Africa's emerging female leaders is yet to come. Will they be able to translate leadership positions into a fresh agenda for peace, sustainable development and democracy in the region?

In the case of Liberia, the challenges are daunting. A fresh agenda would mean mending the social fabric torn apart by 25 years of crisis and chaos in which 250,000 people were killed. A Harvard-educated economist, Johnson-Sirleaf, who was sworn into office in January, should manage well a truth-and-reconciliation process that brings healing to a wounded society and holds key people responsible. A fresh agenda would also transform an economy that has relied on illicit activity for 14 years - trade in diamonds used to finance wars; stolen timber; "raped rubber"; and the flow of illegal arms - into an economy that brings productive activity for the now 85 percent unemployed.

The critical role of women in that society must be recognized by giving them equal inheritance and land rights to allow them to fully and wisely use resources for their families and communities.

The U.S. Congress and the Bush administration should help give Liberia a chance at a fresh start by agreeing to cancel the country's external debts, accumulated under past dictatorships. Those debts, the equivalent of about 680 percent of the country's gross domestic product, undermine the capacity of the new government to tackle the problems of rising HIV/AIDS infection rates and a lack of functioning schools, electricity and other infrastructure. Thirty percent of that debt is owed to the United States, which should not only forgive its share but also encourage other nations to forgive theirs.

The U.S. government should also use its leverage to ensure that U.S. corporations operating in the country act responsibly, paying proper fees, taxes and wages, respecting labor rights and protecting the environment. For example, Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. is now taking advantage of deals made with a former caretaker Liberian government as well as the desperation of many poor Liberians to profit from operations that employ child labor, destroy the environment and violate other international standards.

There is much at stake for Liberia and the rest of Africa. But it's also a time to celebrate and support the region's newly emerging female leaders with a fresh agenda.

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