

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf Biography

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Early Life

Ellen Johnson was born on October 29th, 1938, in Monrovia, Liberia. Her parents were of “Americo-Liberian” descent – meaning that their ancestors had been native to Liberia, but taken as slaves to the Americas, and then once they gained freedom they returned to their native land. Throughout her childhood, and well into her adult years, much of the political and social unrest in Liberia stemmed from tensions between those of Americo-Liberian descendant, and the indigenous people they were inclined to oppress. The government, often times, simply jumped from one dictator to the next, representing a different oppressed group.

Johnson studied accounts and economics at the College of West Africa from 1948 until 1955, when at the age of 17, she married James Sirleaf. After her marriage to Sirleaf, she moved to the United States in 1961, and she continued her studies and earned a degree at the University of Colorado. She remained in the United States until 1972, during which time she “received her Bachelor's in accounting at Madison Business

College in Madison, Wisconsin... and a Master of Public Administration from Harvard University.” *

Political Life

Upon returning to Liberia, Sirleaf began her political life by serving as Assistant Minister of Finance from 1972 to 1973, under President William Tolbert, who represented the growing Americo-Liberian elite.

On April 12th, 1980 there was a military coup led by Samuel Doe, who was part of the Karhn ethnic group, in which President Tolbert and a number of his staff members were executed. To avoid prosecution, Sirleaf fled to Nairobi, Kenya and the United States where she worked in the international banking sector. “From 1983 to 85 she served as Director of Citibank in Nairobi,” † but in 1984 when Samuel Doe became “president” and reestablished political parties, Sirleaf decided to return to Liberia. Shortly after returning, Sirleaf decided to run for a seat in the Senate during the 1985 elections, however, she was sentenced to 10 years in prison for speaking out against Doe’s military regime. “She served a partial sentence before moving to Washington D.C.,” * yet she returned to Africa once again, working as an advisor and an economist for the branches of the World Bank and Citibank in Africa.



President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf with current World Bank President Robert Zoellick

While Sirleaf was living in Washington D.C., there was an uprising in Liberia that resulted in Samuel Doe's execution and Charles Taylor assumed power; however, in 1997, Taylor decided to host democratic elections. She ran in the elections as a presidential candidate against Taylor. The official results put Sirleaf in second place, with Taylor on top as the victor. Shortly after his victory, Taylor accused Sirleaf of treason and was forced, once again, to flee the country.

Sirleaf permanently returned to Liberia in 2003, after Taylor was exiled to Nigeria. The National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) was established and Sirleaf was elected to some of the top positions, taking on the difficult task of "de-corrupting" the government. She fought corruption by taking powers away from the President (executive

branch) and giving them to the legislative branch, so that no one person, party, or branch had too much control over the government.

In 2005, when Liberia had another set of democratic elections, Sirleaf ran for president again. This time, however, victory was hers. On January 16th, 2006, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was inaugurated as the President of Liberia, the post that she still holds to this day. After her inauguration, Sirleaf became not only the first female president of Liberia, but also the first female head of state on the African continent.



President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf after being elected

* "Ellen Johnson Biography"

† Boddy-Evans, Alistair

(excerpt from www.mtholyoke.edu) – (Mount Holyoke College)