

Written by New Narratives fellow Robtel Neajai Pailey

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There was a lot “spoiled” about Liberia in January 2006, when a woman draped in regal gold, with a glitter of hope in her eyes, took the podium, offering a promise of renewal. Monrovia roads had pot-holes the size of bomb craters, and the streets were littered with dirt and debris. Rural roads were barely accessible. Papa, nor mama for that matter, had come home with a job to supply a bag of rice.

Young ex-combatants roamed the streets disillusioned by the promise of reintegration. Poor elementary school-age children sold cold water in markets across the country because school fees were not forthcoming. Young girls and women were still being brutally raped and beaten to death with no consequences for their perpetrators.

The Armed Forces of Liberia and the Liberia National Police could not protect citizens from the smallest aggression across borders, across towns, across villages. Liberia’s natural resources lay dormant. Electricity was supplied by the loud humming of generators, with only older adults able to remember the simplicity of flicking on a light switch.

That brave woman who approached the podium on January 16, 2006, dared try to fix this in six years.

But she na fini yet 'o.

That’s why Ellen Johnson Sirleaf should be re-elected President of Liberia for a second term. No other candidate has done as much for Liberia in the past six years as she has. I speak from first-hand experience, as a former aide in the Executive Mansion, when I say that President Sirleaf is committed to the Liberian people.

I’ve watched her on numerous road trips, after an exhausting day, sit and listen for hours to the concerns, challenges, and aspirations of Liberians from Grand Gedeh to Grand Cape Mount, Buchanan to Barclayville. This was long before elections fever spread through the body politic. I’ve seen her whip with her words appointed officials who were not performing well, and dismiss an entire Cabinet because she questioned their commitment to the job.

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I've seen her walk for hours through thick forest patches that would eventually become the Belle Yella Road, determined to reach by foot the infamous prison where many of her former political allies perished, reminding us that she has more energy than all of us put together, even at 72. Under her leadership, the governance space has opened up, with the emergence of young people, particularly young women like myself, thrust into leadership roles and excelling.

Under her leadership, Liberians from different sectors of society have shared their visions as national orators during six consecutive July 26 celebrations. With all this said, however, I believe that the first term was a "learning experience," as President Sirleaf described the first Jallah Town Road refurbishment project.

How would I do things differently in a second term if I were President Sirleaf?

I would be much more concerned about my legacy than the politics of the day. I would become the true "Iron Lady" that catapulted me to fame, balancing my feminine sensitivity with my intolerance for mediocrity.

I would revise the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) entered into with UNMIL, which gives the agency entirely too many exemptions and privileges. I would reconfigure the national budget, slashing money guzzlers such as big SUVs and large travel budgets for ministries and agencies.

I would invest in education as much as I do in infrastructure, transferring at least 10% of the yearly revenue of 'cash-cows' such as the Liberia Maritime Authority (LMA) and the Roberts International Airport (RIA) to the University of Liberia and the William V.S. Tubman University, thereby producing scientists, doctors, agriculturalists, engineers, etc., to swarm the job market.

I would demand that all civil servants and political appointees take competency tests and pass in order to maintain their jobs, and increase the salaries to a minimum of US\$200.00 per month for the lowest paid Government worker. I would ensure that no political appointee or head of SOE earns more than I do, as this breeds resentment and disparity.

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I would demand that all police officers, lawyers and judges undergo 100 hours of ethical leadership training as a pre-requisite for practicing in Liberia. I would insist that the Press Union of Liberia institute a similar requirement for journalists, media executives and media development specialists.

I would support a lobby to pass the dual citizenship bill currently before the Legislature, only if it is revised to include severe punishment for breaking the laws of the land and fleeing to a second party country. I would surround myself with the best and brightest Liberian minds, regardless of political affiliations, and only those committed to my vision of transformation and change would remain cloaked by my support.

I would begin to have nation-wide discussions once a month, focused on transforming Liberia's system of values, and weeding out corruption from top to bottom.

I would hold concessionaires hostage, making sure that at least 50% of their management positions are occupied by qualified Liberians. I would also learn from the mistakes of my regional neighbors, ensuring that a significant portion of Liberia's natural resources is retained for processing in-country and value addition.

I would adopt a "Look South" policy, setting up trading blocs with new emerging markets such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, giving Liberia's "traditional" partners a run for their money.

I would minimize my international travel, encouraging potential investors and "friends of Liberia" to meet me on my own soil for bilateral discussions. I would personally support the work of activist civil society organizations such as AFELL, Action-Aid Liberia, CENTAL, and the JPC, which give voice to the voiceless, particularly women and girls.

I would "fix" as much as I could within a second term, convincing even my detractors that, in the words of the great Sande Zoe, dramatist, and seasoned matron of Kendeja, Ma Gbessie Kaizolu, "Who say it can't fix? What can spoil it can't fix? Anything can spoil and fix."

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