AFRICA 30.04.2018 | Paul Okolo

Liberia: President George Weah's first 100 days

The footballer-turned-president is making good on promises to increase transparency

Leading any country is not for novices at the best of times. For President George Weah, steering Liberia after its destructive civil war, economic crisis and an Ebola epidemic is a daunting task even for those experienced in statecraft, let alone a former football icon.

From 22 January when he took office, Weah was not under any illusion that running the country would be easy. In his maiden address, he gave a grim yet accurate assessment of the state of the nation: 'Our economy is broken; our government is broke. Our currency is in free fall; inflation is rising,' Weah said. 'Unemployment is at an unprecedented high and our foreign reserves are at an all-time low.'

Star appeal

Impoverished Liberians voted massively for the former international football player of the year at the December 2017 polls because of the generosity and patriotism he displayed in the past, despite his international superstar status. Many will remember that as captain of the national football team in the 1990s, Weah substantially financed the team's training and official engagements from his own pocket. The electorate didn't forget, and rewarded him with their votes.

His first acts in office didn't disappoint. In a country that lost 250,000 lives in two civil wars between 1989 and 2003, he helped to ease tension by paying a well-publicised visit to the previous Vice President, and his opponent, Joseph Boakai at the December 2017 ballot. War-weary Liberians applauded it as a sign of maturity necessary to achieve national reconciliation.

When Weah announced a 25 per cent cut in his salary and allowances, it resonated well with the poor. Although a drop in the ocean, his objective was to 'remain very consistent in pushing for a pro-poor governance

agenda to address poverty,' said the World Bank.

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He also showed that key priorities for his government were to improve public sector transparency and efficiency, creating an environment for transparent and honest businesses, filling in infrastructure gaps, and creating jobs for youth, the Bank said.

On another front, Weah says he's seeking to amend the constitution to allow non-Liberians to become citizens. The law banning foreigners from owning property will equally be jettisoned. If he succeeds, it will ensure that foreign investors will be encouraged to bring fresh funds to improve the economy, grow its gross domestic product currently standing at around $2.2 billion, and create jobs.

Making friends

As for Weah's foreign policy, countries that appear most likely to advance Liberia's development priorities have been promptly contacted.

His first trip abroad was to France to see President Emmanuel Macron. The rationale for that was arguably to leverage France's influence in the European Union to get EU assistance for rebuilding the country. Then he visited Senegal, Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria – all neighbours and members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with whom Liberia has very close relations.

Those trips have borne fruits. Nigeria agreed to help train thousands of teachers; Ghana will provide doctors; and Cote D'Ivoire promised electric power from its grid. If they deliver promptly, these deals will soon put Liberia's infrastructure on the path of recovery.

A war-ravaged land

Due to events of its recent history, basic social amenities like education, health, water and electricity are in ruins in this country of some five million people. It lost about 5,000 people to the Ebola crisis in 2014 because of the absence of reliable health facilities and sufficient health workers. By contrast, the death toll in neighbouring Sierra-Leone and Guinea where the outbreak was more severe was lower.

Going forward, the

To achieve a peaceful and stable country, therefore, Liberians must help themselves and

president should refrain from any action or speech that could create anxiety or be used by supporters to repress real or perceived opponents.

not truncate the rule of law or frustrate the healing of old wounds. For example, punishing people with blood on their hands during the wars will help the healing process. Yet it should be done carefully so as not to create more problems in the future. Weah can learn from Rwanda and South Africa how they dealt with reconciling former foes after the 1994 genocide and the crimes of apartheid respectively.

Also, Liberians have a responsibility to protect the freedom of the press, of association and uphold other human rights. Weah has promised not to encumber freedom of speech. However, during a recent press conference, the president accused BBC journalist Jonathan Paye-Layleh of having been 'against him' during his times as a human rights activist in the civil war. Fearing reprisals from Weah's supporters, Paye-Layleh fled the country, but returned one month later.

Liberia's Daily Observer newspaper has urged Weah to use Paye-Layleh's return as an opportunity to resume the national reconciliation process. Going forward, the president should refrain from any action or speech that could create anxiety or be used by supporters to repress real or perceived opponents.

Besides the need for a free press, the country will require strong civil society organisations to act as watchdogs. Other vital state institutions, including the judiciary and police must be guaranteed their independence so that they will be capable of defending its constitution.

Over the last three months, Weah has demonstrated the will and temperament to hold Liberia together. Just as the international community came to Liberia's rescue during the Ebola crisis four years ago, so it must rally round again to help its rookie president succeed.



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