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Ellen Johnson Sirleaf scores another goal for women

The former Liberian president wins the prestigious Mo Ibrahim Prize

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who until the end of January served as Liberia's president, last week won the 2017 Mo Ibrahim Prize for achievement in African Leadership. The prize is given to an ex-African head of state who leaves office voluntarily at the end of their constitutional tenure. By virtue of being a two-time elected president from 2006 to 2018, Ms Sirleaf qualified for consideration.

In awarding her the $5 million (€4.1 million) prize, the committee charged with selecting the winner praised her for 'her exceptional and transformative leadership in the face of unprecedented and renewed challenges to lead Liberia's recovery following many years of devastating civil war'.

'In very difficult circumstances, she helped guide her nation towards a peaceful and democratic future, paving the way for a successor to follow.'

Ms Sirleaf's choice has been welcomed across Africa. She's 'such an example and inspiration for women and girls on the continent,' Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a former Nigerian Finance Minister and ex-Managing Director of the World Bank, tweeted. Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank (AfDB), called her 'a jewel of Africa'.

But the tribute that best captured why she won came from Mo Ibrahim himself, the Sudanese billionaire who founded the prize:

'In very difficult circumstances, she helped guide her nation towards a peaceful and democratic future, paving the way for a successor to follow,' the telecom businessman wrote. 'I hope Ellen Johnson Sirleaf will continue to inspire women in Africa and beyond.'

Rare accolade

With her award, 79-year-old Ms Sirleaf, the first elected female president on the continent, joins an exclusive list of just four previous male laureates who delivered good governance while in power. Nelson Mandela was the honorary winner at the award's inception in 2007.

Sirleaf is no stranger to accolades, having shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with two other female activists. The judges were no doubt impressed by her calm demeanour and commitment to the democratic process, which helped pave the way for a smooth transition of power to President George Weah last month.

Sirleaf's tenure was not without turbulence, however. The greatest challenge of her presidency was the Ebola epidemic that ravaged the country and the neighbouring West African states of Sierra Leone and Guinea. Liberia's healthcare system collapsed in the wake of the crisis, and it took the intervention of foreign governments and NGOs to bring the situation under control.

Ebola epidemic

Critics blamed Ms Sirleaf for complacency during the initial stages of the Ebola crisis. 'Just 50 doctors at that time served Liberia's 4.3 million people. Sluggish education and quarantine efforts failed because of widespread mistrust of the government, and particularly Ms. Johnson Sirleaf,' wrote Dayo Olopade in the New York Times. Olopade argues Sirleaf is not the hero she is perceived to be by Western countries and institutions.

Liberia's losses to Ebola were the biggest of the three most affected countries in the sub-region. About 5,000 Liberians died – more than the casualties in neighbouring Sierra Leone and Guinea that had higher infection levels.

Sirleaf's critics also accused her of nepotism and corruption. Her sons occupied key positions in her administration and scandals involving government officials and family members didn't help her image inside the country. At one point, activist Leymah Gbowee, her compatriot and co-Nobel laureate, quit her position in the government in protest.

Room for optimism

Despite these shortcomings, it was perhaps because of the maturity with

which she ran the country for 12 years, preventing Liberia from being plunged into another period of instability that got her the prize. Liberia continues to face challenges today, but during her time, she laid the foundation on which Liberia could now build, said Dr Salim Ahmed Salim, a former Secretary General of the Organisation of African Unity and Chair of the Prize Committee.

Going forward, what are the chances that there'll be a winner next year and thereafter? Sadly, the political situation in a number of African countries today isn't promising. There seems to be little hope of a peaceful democratic change in countries such as Burundi, Togo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Central African Republic. Jacob Zuma, the newly-resigned president of South Africa who faces a string of corruption allegations, is not even on the radar of selectors.

Yet, there is room for optimism. Ghana's immediate past president John Mahama looks like a future laureate. Not only did he ensure a level playing field in the 2016 presidential election which he lost, he duly relinquished power to the incumbent without any fuss. Senegal, Ivory Coast, Seychelles, Botswana, Cape Verde, Namibia and Tanzania may produce future winners before long if the democratic track record is anything to go by.



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