

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Former President of Liberia and Africa's first elected female head of state; Nobel Peace Laureate; a leading promoter of peace, justice and democratic rule; a voice for freedom and advocate for health for all.

- President of Liberia 2006-2018
- Nobel Peace Laureate 2011
- Restless campaigner for the end of military dictatorship and freedom for Liberia
- Played an active role in the Transitional Government of Liberia as the country recovered from civil war

"I look forward to working with The Elders to inspire people everywhere, particularly women and girls, to reach for their true potential, break through barriers and pursue their dreams."

Africa's first elected female Head of State

Following over a decade of exile during Liberia's civil war, Johnson Sirleaf returned to the country in 2003 and oversaw preparations for democratic elections. She was elected in 2005, vowing to end corruption, establish unity, and rebuild the country's devastated infrastructure.

During the violence, Liberia had become one of the world's poorest nations with crippling levels of unemployment. Johnson Sirleaf immediately sought debt amelioration and the lifting of trade sanctions from the international community. By late 2010, Liberia's entire debt had been erased, and Johnson Sirleaf had secured millions of dollars of foreign investment in the country.

By executive order, Johnson Sirleaf established a right to free, universal primary education and secured the funding for a new national university. She made efforts toward eradicating corruption, including the creation of the Anti-Corruption Commission in 2008.

In 2017, Johnson Sirleaf retired after two full terms in office. This ensured the country's first peaceful, democratic transition of power in 73 years in January 2018. A month later, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was awarded the highly prestigious Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership – a prize awarded only to democratically-elected African leaders who leave office at the end of their constitutionally mandated terms.

Promoter of peace, justice and democracy

In 2011, Johnson Sirleaf was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, alongside women's rights campaigners Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Tawakkul Karman of Yemen. She was awarded the prize for her contribution to "securing peace in Liberia, to promoting economic and social development, and to strengthening the position of women."

Johnson Sirleaf remained committed to freedom, peace and democracy for Liberia during several periods of exile and imprisonment while extreme violence ravaged the country.

Johnson Sirleaf was an outspoken critic of the regimes led by Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor, becoming her country's most visible advocate for reform and returning to run in elections, only to be forced to flee each time. President Taylor threatened to have her killed for her opposition to his administration, and she was forced to move to Côte d'Ivoire and witness her country being plunged into war with its neighbours, only able to return after the violence had ceased in 2003.

Upon her return, Johnson Sirleaf chaired the Governance Reform Commission of the Transitional Government and was instrumental in preparing the country for its first democratic elections.

Healthcare Reformer

Since stepping down as President, building on lessons learnt during the Ebola epidemic, Johnson Sirleaf has become a staunch advocate for community health workers and free primary healthcare, as, among other things, a means to protect against the spreading of infectious diseases.

During the civil war Liberia's healthcare infrastructure was severely damaged, with less than half of the population having any access to medical care by 2003. Johnson Sirleaf helped rebuild the healthcare system through new clinics, schools and training centres.

Following the Ebola epidemic, she launched a national community health assistance programme to serve more than 4,000 remote communities in the hardest to reach areas, recognising that primary healthcare providers are the best positioned to spot the early warning signs of outbreaks.