

[Liberia]

Liberia's difficult reconstruction

For more than 14 years, one of the worst civil wars in Africa raged in Liberia. The fighting ended in August 2003. Since then, Liberia has enjoyed peace. But while many things have improved in the country, the political situation is anything but stable.

[By Till Blume]

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is the first woman to be elected president of Liberia. For more than three years, she has been trying to make governmental agencies more efficient. She was successful in cancelling international debt and promote investment. But Liberia's political institutions are not exactly helping out. The parliament, a number of ministries, the justice system, and security services seem partially paralyzed in light of internal strife and turf battles. To make matters worse, several members of the "old guard" are still in positions of influence. For instance, former rebel leaders are now senators, such as Prince Johnson, who recently refused to testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but who is known to have tortured and murdered the former despot Samuel K. Doe, apart from having committed massacres of civilians.

Corruption remains a major problem. The division in Parliament last year is just one example of that. A dispute arose when the speaker of parliament, a former son-in-law of ex-dictator Charles Taylor, was accused of embezzlement. He eventually stepped down.

Moreover, charges made by the country's auditor general against the president herself raised quite a furor; though they turned out to be groundless, they did cause some confusion among Liberians and the international community. At the same time, there are positive developments. For instance, some members of the transitional government now face charges of corruption for their actions from 2003 to 2005. Clearly, an end is to be put to decades of abuse of power.

Under the leadership of Johnson-Sirleaf, the country's entire administration is being re-organised. However, the task of coherently dividing the country up into different administrative levels – regions, districts, towns and villages – has not been completed. As recently as the late 20th century, Liberia had no effective administration in many areas outside Monrovia. President Johnson-Sirleaf therefore had to start from scratch: she re-appointed county superintendents who coordinate the work of ministries in the areas under their jurisdiction.

The president appointed a number of Liberians who, like herself, had migrated to the US during the civil war to ministerial positions. Nonetheless, the administration as a whole remains quite weak. Staff of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), the World Bank and other international organisations are advising a number of ministries and regional government bodies. Specifically, they are involved in local capacity-building to promote the efficiency and competence of the civil service.

A lot remains to be done, both for President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and for the major ministers in her government. Finance Minister Antoinette Sayeh plays an especially important role. After all, Liberia's state budget is kept under constant surveillance within the Governance and Economic Management Programme (GEMAP). One of Sayeh's tasks is to stabilise the budget and increase tax revenue. Crucial data look good, Liberia's GDP is rising. After having fallen by almost a third in 2003, Liberia's economic output rose by nearly nine percent last year.

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International donors have cancelled the lion's share of the country's debt; and a Poverty Reduction Strategy is in place since this year. International steel and rubber producers have once again begun investing in Liberia. Last year, they invested some \$ 97 million in the country.

Nonetheless, tremendous obstacles remain. Liberia is still dependent on foreign investors for a nearly complete lack of domestic investments. Aside from small shops, market stands, shoe cleaners and vendors of telephone cards, almost no small- or medium-size enterprise is owned by a Liberian. Furthermore, micro-finance schemes are rare; and the country suffers from high unemployment. According to estimates, 85 % of the eligible people do not have formal-sector jobs.

Lack of security

Despite many problems, Liberia is considered a model case, partly because of UNMIL, which is often cited as an example of a well-integrated peacekeeping force. UNMIL staff not only provides security, but, in cooperation with other UN bodies, also take care of humanitarian aid and development. Since the beginning of the year, however, UNMIL has started to slowly but surely reduce its staff; and its withdrawal is a cause of concern for many.

Although Liberia's own security forces have set up billboards pronouncing that "the police is working for you", it is obvious that the LNP (Liberia National Police) and AFL (Armed Forces of Liberia) are not up to the task. Since mid-2007, more police officers and soldiers have been recruited, with some 4500 now on duty, but that number hardly suffices to cover the entire country. Many police officers sent to beats outside Monrovia actually get there today, thanks to UNMIL support, but in many cases they do not have adequate housing or transport. Some stay in Monrovia in spite of assignments elsewhere. However, due to improved police management, it is becoming harder for officers to stay away from their duties.

Thanks to a growing number of female LNP officers, moreover, the public's faith in the security forces has somewhat improved. In general, crime rates are dropping. Nonetheless, a lot of former warriors are trying to keep their heads above water as small-time criminals. Rape is also still on the rise.

For all these reasons, many Liberians do not hold the public services in high regard, no matter which specific one is being discussed. Indeed, harassment, hate campaigns and mob justice have targeted both individuals and the government. For many, protest is the only way to vent anger and express their opinion.

It all sounds so easy: "Let's reconcile and live together." This call for peace is written on Providence Bridge, formerly one of the main battlegrounds in Monrovia. But reconstruction is difficult and time consuming. Liberia has to be reinvented, as Stephen Ellis (2006) put it. That has not happened yet.

For instance, traditional leaders still wield a lot of power. How they relate to heads of local administrative offices is not clear. Many civil-society organisations would need more support to take part in international programmes and come up with their own strategies. Setting up an up-to-date civil service, boosting infrastructure and improving education are essential to safeguard people's survival and a sustainable development of the country.

In spite of many efforts made, much remains to be done. Reconciliation is only slowly making headway, both at the national and

the local levels. Ultimately, Liberians themselves are responsible for an important part of this development. Government agencies will have to work even harder to win the trust of the people. Rifts between Americo-Liberians, many of who are now running the country again, and indigenous Liberians were not the least cause of civil war breaking out. The most difficult task will be to come up with a common vision.

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Refernce:

Ellis, Stephen, 2006:

Mask of Anarchy. The Religious Dimension of the Liberian Civil War. 2nd edition. New York University Press.

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