

Profile: Liberia's 'Iron Lady'

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, 67, fondly called the "Iron Lady" by her supporters, has become Africa's first elected female head of state following Liberia's presidential run-off.

During the election campaign, the diminutive grandmother figure was often dwarfed by her party officials and bodyguards but over a political career spanning almost 30 years she has earned her steely nickname.

She was imprisoned in the 1980s for criticising the military regime of Samuel Doe and then backed Charles Taylor's rebellion before falling out with him and being charged with treason after he became president.

She twice went into exile to escape her legal problems with the governments of the day.

In 1997, she came a distant second to Mr Taylor in elections following a short-lived peace deal.

One veteran of Liberia's political scene said Mrs Johnson-Sirleaf's nickname comes from her iron will and determination.

"It would have been much easier for her to quit politics and sit at home like others have done but she has never given up," he said.

Her supporters say she has two advantages over the man she faced in the run-off - former football star George Weah - she is better educated and is a woman.

'Motherly sensitivity'

Mrs Johnson-Sirleaf has held a string of international financial positions, from minister of finance in the late 1970s to Africa director at the United Nations Development Programme.

So, the argument goes, who better to rebuild Liberia's shattered economy?

" Only a man can be strong enough to deal with all the ex-combatants. Liberia just isn't ready to have a woman leader yet "
Liberian man

And she says she is ready to start on what will be an enormous task.

"We know expectations are going to be high. The Liberian people have voted for their confidence in my ability to deliver... very quickly," she told Reuters news agency.

Many educated Liberians - and members of the old elite descended from freed American slaves - gave Mrs Johnson-Sirleaf their backing.

Women and some gender-sensitive men in the city are also quick to blame men for wrecking the country.

"We need a woman to put things right," said one waitress.

Mrs Johnson-Sirleaf said she wants to become president in order "to bring motherly sensitivity and emotion to the presidency" as a way of healing the wounds of war.

She has pledged to work towards reconciliation by bringing her former opponents into a government of national unity - if they want to join her.

"We are going to reach out to them and assure them the country is also theirs," she said.

Throughout her campaign, she has said that if she won, it would encourage women across Africa to seek high political office.

But in rural areas, where male-dominated traditions remain strong, there may be some resistance to the idea of a female leader.

Even one well-educated man said: "Only a man can be strong enough to deal with all the ex-combatants. Liberia just isn't ready to have a woman leader yet."

Land reform

Some are wary of her because of her previous support for Mr Taylor - currently facing 17 charges of war crimes for his alleged ties to rebels in neighbouring Sierra Leone.

After spending a generation in politics, she comes with considerable baggage and has stepped on many important toes in her time.

She constantly stresses her commitment to the fight against corruption and after returning from exile, she served as head of the Governance Reform Commission set up as part of the deal to end Liberia's civil war in 2003.

She resigned that post to contest the presidency, criticising the transitional government's inability to fight corruption.

She also promises to "revisit the land tenure system" in order to remove a potential source of dispute between Liberia's rival ethnic groups. At present, much of Liberia's land is controlled by local chiefs.

Mrs Johnson-Sirleaf, a divorcee whose ex-husband died a few years ago, is the mother of four sons and has six grandchildren.

Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/4395978.stm>

Published: 2005/11/23 11:57:36 GMT

© BBC 2012