

Remarks of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
of Liberia
National Democratic Institute –
W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award
Washington, D.C.
October 24, 2007

All Protocols Observed:

I want to thank the National Democratic Institute (NDI) for bestowing upon me this honor, the W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award, which recognizes leadership, integrity and courage, and a dedication to democratic values and practices."

I am humbled both by the award's distinction, and be in the presence of such accomplished women, including the first woman to become an American Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, and the first woman to become Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi. I would also like to recognize the 50/50 Group of Sierra Leone, my neighbours, who through their efforts have empowered the women of their country and encouraged them to play a meaningful role in their country's political life and culture.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank the National Democratic Institute-an organization that I have known since the day I was released from prison in 1986-also to express my gratitude to Secretary Albright and Ken Wollock for the support as we

rebuild our nation. NDI World wide staff, who every day toil in the world's emerging democracies to ensure their success. I know NDI does not work alone, and that it partners with institutions like the International Republican Institute, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the Center for International Private Enterprise, the Solidarity Center, and the National Endowment for Democracy, in order to guarantee that the institutions of democracy can take root around the world.

To NDI then, and all of its partners, I take this moment to applaud your work." (Please clap)

I applaud your work even more because together, you all focus not just on elections, but the institutions of democracy.

Just a few days ago, I spoke at the annual AFRICARE dinner. I was in the company of other great American women including Mrs. Laura Bush, the First Lady, and Congresswoman Nita Lowey, the Chairwoman of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee.

At that dinner, I told the audience that my primary challenge was to create the institutions that will stand the test of time; institutions that will be the hallmark of democracy for my grandchildren's grandchildren."

I also noted that for too long, those watching Africa have focused on personalities, relying on one person, often one big man, to lead the way.

You in this room, who work to guarantee free and fair multiparty elections, know that for too long in Africa, it has been one man one vote, one time. But this is mentality has failed Africa, undermining accountability and constitutionally defined government.

It is not about the individual, the leader, but the institutions they build.

For those of you that know Liberia's recent history, you can appreciate that the Liberian people have the great people of the United States of America to thank for Liberia's chance at freedom, and its renewed national hope."

The off-shore deployment of US marines in 2003, Mr. Charles Taylor's flight into exile, the formation of a transitional government, the building of initial democratic institutions including the National Electoral Commission, support to civil society groups and the training of Liberia's nascent political parties, two rounds of free and fair elections in 2005--all of these were accomplished with American support And we travel together a long but hopefully fruitful road to rebuild Liberia, so that it can truly be a post-conflict success story.

On behalf of the Liberian people, at whose pleasure I serve, I want to recognize President George W. Bush, who made the courageous and unpopular decision to return US troops to Africa for the first time since 1993, when US troops evacuated Somalia. And I want to thank him and his Administration for continuing to provide generous support to my Administration in the area of healthcare, education, infrastructure and security so that we can show our people that there is truly a democracy dividend - that the most prosperous future for them and their families is one free of warfare and destruction.

I also want to recognize the generosity of the US Congress, under the leadership of my friend, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who granted me the honor of addressing a Joint Meeting of Congress in early 2006, and who has broken every bureaucratic obstacle to ensure that Liberia's needs can be met through Annual Appropriations, Supplemental Appropriations and now, as I understand it, through authorizing legislation that will set targets for Liberia for the next five years and state, for the record, that it is in the US national security interest to support Liberia's re-emergence from a post-conflict country to a thriving democracy. And as Speaker Pelosi and Congresswoman Lowey have not acted alone, I want to take a moment to recognize the broad bi-partisan support that Liberia has received from members including: Congressmen Jesse Jackson Jr., Ed Royce, Chris Smith, and Donald Payne; Congresswomen Diane Watson and Gwen Moore; and Senators

Russ Feingold and Patrick Leahy. I know I am leaving out other champions for Liberia, so forgive me for that omission.

And to this audience- Thank you all not only what you have done, but what you continue to do to support Liberia -- for what you do every day to give hope to people around the world that democracy is in their future."

When the politics in Washington is united, (like they have been in the case of Liberia), across party lines, towards a common goal, there is nothing that this great nation of the United States of America can not accomplish.

I realize from my trips around the world that some find it hard to square the images of violence and tragedy in Iraq with the traditional image of the United States as a symbol of liberty and justice.

But let me tell you here today that American beacon of freedom burns no less bright on the African continent. We look across the sea, and we can see our future calling to us, a future of peaceful, inclusive politics, in countries free of poverty, war, and corruption.

I have heard some argue that the policy of promoting democracy abroad, was relevant in its contemporary context, but no longer retains a place in the 21st century.

But I am here as living proof to tell you that if the U.S. were to lose its will and go quiet on issues of liberty and human rights, that this would shake the foundations of democracy around the world."

As one world, connected by as never before by 24 hour news and communications, we all see the same images of leaders who seem to be thumbing their noses at the world's democracies. Many of these nations engage in the charade of democracy. But I am here to say to this distinguished audience that it is my firm belief that the national leaders that place narrow autocratic interests above the popular will and interests of their people - leaders that thrive from the export of instability and uncertainty -- will not succeed.

History has proven that they will not stand the test of time, and it will do so again.

I still believe that DEMOCRACY is sacred. We should not allow countries to call themselves democracies, or to be accepted into global democratic institutions when behind the rhetoric, liberty, personal freedoms, and civil rights fall prey to fear and repression.

We all know that democracy is not just about elections. It is about sustaining institutions of government and civil society that protect the individual over the State. It is about freedom of speech, and the inherent right to criticize State authorities. It is about due process

and rule of law. It is about a level economic playing field, about the right to educate our children and practice any religious beliefs.

To achieve these goals we must support those institutions that provide the checks and balance in governments and in the society at large-those civil society organizations such as the media that serves as the watchdog, exercising freedom with responsibility; those institutions that represent the pillars of integrity to ensure the sanctity of choice, a fair and speedy recourse in the violation of rights. We must ensure that our vulnerable youths can become part of part of and contribute to society once again through equal opportunity for education and skills learning. We must be responsive to the needs of our grassroots women by improving their conditions of work and formulate measures to protect our girls against rape and abuse

The government continues to support and endorse the wide number of programs being funded by our partners for strengthening the capacity and elevating the role of civil society. Additionally, civil society's role within the GEMAP, EITI, recent passage of the Governance Commission and the ongoing debate of the anti-corruption act demonstrates the continuing evolving role of civil society.

On freedom of speech, the currently level of freedom the press enjoys in Liberia is unprecedented. The absence of political

prisoners in our prisons, the freedom to assemble resulting in many peaceful demonstrations, rallies and protest by various citizens groups for salary arrears, etc. speaks to the government's posture on civil freedoms.

We have embarked upon judicial reform which involves strengthening the administration of justice – circuit court houses and magistrates' courts in Liberia are being constructed or renovated, equipped and staffed; we have completed a review of our court administration procedures and are set to begin the implementation process; but our Law Reform Commission needs to be established. Legal aid clinics are being made available across the country to provide our citizens with access to justice. To support the rule of law, we have developed the national policy framework and operational program for the Bureau of Rehabilitation and Corrections and commenced the process of recruiting and training correctional staff across the country.

My government is taking serious steps to put an end to gender-based violence. To comprehensively address these issues, a national action plan has been completed and implementation initiated; a national women's and children's rights strategy is now completed and implementation has commenced. The capacity of the Ministry of Gender and Development is being strengthened to deliver on gender equality and women empowerment objectives as well as address gender-based violence issues. But it

is critical that we develop and maintain a dynamic analytical database on gender-base and sexual violence.

Our National Elections commission needs to be strengthened. They have already conducted by-elections in four counties over the past eighteen months and is preparing for one more. The government's commitment to strengthening this Commission is reflected in the consistent increase in budgetary allocations over the past two years – there is a 48 percent increase in the 2007/2008 national budget.

So I ask the support of this audience today to ensure that I am not just remembered as the first elected women President of Africa, but as the leader who turned a post-conflict country crippled by twenty-five years of decline and a civil war, with more than 200,000 dead and one million displaced, into a symbol of stability and democracy where the free market and private investment can prosper, where an empowered people, free from dependency and violence, can take their destiny into their own hands.

Please translate your faith in my administration into the institutions that will live beyond my presidency, and serve Liberia far into the future.

I am particularly grateful to receive this W. Averell Harriman Award. Ambassador Harriman was no mandarin; he believed that

freedom and liberty are universal virtues. He was realistic, and understood the difficult and constant efforts required to build a better World. And he was also idealistic in perceiving democracy at the global level and the neighbourhood level, a rare combination. In accepting this award we will share his vision, and carry on his ideals.