

Nobel win no help to president's polls bid
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By Adam Nossiter

President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf may have won the Nobel Peace Prize but in Liberia, her success counts for little as the country is still mired in poverty and corruption. ADAM NOSSITER looks at her prospects at the presidential polls today

THE day began in the battered seaside capital of Monrovia with shouts and drumming for a leading Liberian politician -- but not the one honoured with a Nobel Peace Prize on Friday.

President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the Nobel winner, is lionised by the outside world as the woman who calmed a country ravaged by years of brutal civil war.

But she is viewed more sceptically at home by a population still mired in poverty and official corruption, and struggling with little electricity. Its attention is fixed on something much closer to home than the Nobel committee in Oslo: a closely contested presidential campaign involving a popular former football star.

While Liberians widely acknowledge that peace and security have improved markedly during her tenure, Johnson-Sirleaf's success in securing forgiveness for billions of dollars in Liberian debt and the transformation she has effected in the nation's once infamous international image are often less appreciated here than abroad.

Indeed, as the world absorbed the news of her prize, Monrovia was virtually shut down by a previously scheduled rally to energise the opposition before the presidential election today. The early-morning shouting reverberating through the city was for the former sports hero, George Weah, one of Johnson-Sirleaf's opponents.

In Oslo, though, she was honoured as a peacemaker, along with two women who share the prize with her this year, Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Tawakkol Karman of Yemen.

"Three women receiving the Nobel Peace Prize is really overwhelming," Gbowee said. "It's finally a recognition that we can't ignore the other half of the world's population."

Gbowee led a grassroots women's protest movement credited with helping to end the 14-year war in Liberia in 2003. She was at the forefront of mass open-air demonstrations at a Monrovia fish market in defiance of the warlords who ruled the country, shaming them into heeding the women's demands.

About 250,000 people were killed in the war, and the country's infrastructure, institutions and economy were ruined. With its accounts of mass killings, rape and cannibalism, Liberia -- the first independent republic in Africa -- had become a poster child for Africa's ills.

The country has been at peace since then, roads have been built, children in uniform again

attend classes, the country's US\$4.6 billion (RM14.7 billion) in foreign debt has been wiped out, and Johnson-Sirleaf is credited with presiding over the change.

In 2005, she became the first woman elected as a head of state in Africa, and the Nobel committee, in highlighting the gender of this year's recipients, acknowledged the central role that the Liberian war's most brutalised victims -- women -- have played in healing the country.

"We are now going into our ninth year of peace, and every Liberian has contributed to it," Johnson-Sirleaf said on Friday in Monrovia after the Nobel announcement. "We particularly give this credit to Liberian women, who have consistently led the struggle for peace, even under conditions of neglect."

Johnson-Sirleaf's opponents dismissed the prize and its potential impact on the race.

"I don't think there are many Liberians who pay attention to the pronouncements of the Nobel committee," said Robert Tubman, a spokesman for the nominal head of Weah's ticket, Winston Tubman.

The frenzy here all week has been for the former football star, and on Friday, Monrovia was mobbed by supporters of the Weah-Tubman ticket. Traffic was paralysed and streets were jammed in the final pre-election rally.

"Let the international community know that we are tired with this woman," said Nathaniel Eastman, an unemployed man. "In fact, a woman cannot be the head. Man will always be the head."

Weah, who lost to Johnson-Sirleaf in the 2005 election, brings traffic to a standstill wherever he appears, leaning out of his olive green Hummer.

Nobody disputes that the political atmosphere in Liberia, once a byword for repression, has lightened beyond recognition under Johnson-Sirleaf. A veteran of Liberian politics, she has a master's degree in public administration from Harvard, once served as minister of finance in a government overthrown in a bloody coup, and later spent years in political exile.

"You hear that noise?" said a doctor who lived here through the years of turmoil, Moses Massaquoi, gesturing out the window at the din from an opposition political rally.

"In America, people talk like that, too," he said, suggesting that Liberia had reached a level of democracy in which government opponents could campaign openly, even boisterously.

But analysts say more tangible benefits are harder to pin down. Corruption "remains pervasive at all levels" amid "widespread claims of malfeasance in government circles", a recent report on Liberia by the International Crisis Group noted.

A leading anti-corruption official was not reappointed, and Johnson-Sirleaf has ignored a report by a commission set up to investigate crimes committed during the war. It recommended that she be banned from office for 30 years because of her early involvement with the warlord Charles Taylor, which she later said she regretted. There have been no prosecutions, rankling many voters.

"If people are not penalised, other people might have similar mind to do the same thing," said Agrippe Nyanti, a pastor.

This mixed picture dampened expressions of enthusiasm for the newest Nobel laureate.

"Progress, generally, yes -- we're not at war," said John Kollie, head of Liberia Media Initiative, a good-governance organisation. But he adds that Weah's camp "have the people behind them" and it will be "tough" for the president.

Those who support her insist that the scale of her task -- putting a country in ruins back together -- makes the yardstick unfair.

One of the biggest boons she has brought to this small coastal nation of just fewer than four million people is invisible on the ground and appears to be largely a matter of indifference to the impoverished citizens here.

"Liberia was a fearful, frightful, violent place," said the US ambassador here, Linda Thomas-Greenfield. "She's changed that image. She's made Liberia a country that's respected." --
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