



## LIBERIA: A FAILED STATE REBUILT?

**Events:** During the 1990s, Liberia was often cited as a classic example of a failed state. Its ethnic and religious mixes, widespread poverty, endemic corruption, collapse of institutions and infrastructure, and tendency towards warlordism and violence imperilled the security and welfare of its citizens and affected other states, notably neighbouring Sierra Leone. Liberia, Africa's oldest republic, collapsed into civil war in the late 1980s when Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rebels overran much of the countryside, seizing the capital, Monrovia, in 1990. Around 250,000 people were killed and many thousands more fled the country as fighting intensified between rebel splinter groups, the Liberian army and West African peacekeepers. The 14-year civil war ended in 2003 when, under mounting international pressure and hemmed in by rebels, Taylor stepped down and went into exile in Nigeria (he was later found guilty of war crimes by an international tribunal in The Hague, linked to atrocities carried out in Sierra Leone). A transitional government steered the country towards elections in 2005, which in 2006 brought the Harvard-educated economist Elaine Johnson-Sirleaf to power, becoming Africa's first female head of state. Sirleaf was re-elected in an uncontested run-off presidential election in 2011 and remained in office until 2017, when she was replaced by the former football star, George Weah.

**Significance:** Successful state-building has to overcome at least three challenges. First, new institutions and structures have to be constructed in a context of often deep political and ethnic tension, economic and social dislocation, and endemic poverty. In Liberia, the process of reconstructing the economic and social infrastructure was accelerated once Sirleaf and her Unity Party (UP) assumed power. Central Monrovia was transformed with improved roads and shining new buildings; investment in education and health saw the building of hundreds of new schools and health facilities, some of them free and affordable; and, alongside the elected presidency and legislature, progress was made in establishing an independent judiciary, and a disciplined police and military. Other important institutions have included Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, modelled on the experience of South Africa, and the National Election Commission (NEC), which presided over its first elections in 2011. Nevertheless, many development



goals have yet to be achieved, despite considerable sums of money having been provided by international donors. For example, most people in Monrovia still do not have electricity or running water, and unemployment remains extremely high, with young people being most affected.

Second, the indigenous leadership and new institutions need to enjoy a significant measure of legitimacy. This is why state-building is invariably linked to the promotion of 'good governance', with the eradication of corruption being a key goal. Before contesting the presidency, Sirleaf had resigned her post as head of the Governance Reform Commission, criticizing the transitional government's inability to fight corruption. However, her opponents claim that her administration is guilty of some of the crimes it associates with previous governments. In 2009, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission implicated Sirleaf in the civil war and recommended that she be banned from public office for 30 years. The 2011 elections were also highly divisive. Sirleaf's main opponent, Winston Tubman, boycotted the run-off election, claiming that the NEC was biased in favour of the president and had manipulated vote-counting in her favour.

Third, successful state-building often requires external support, although this may become more of a hindrance than a help. State-building 'from above', associated with military intervention, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, clearly has its drawbacks, not least because indigenous leaders and new institutions are in danger of being seen to serve external interests rather than domestic ones. In the case of Liberia, the support of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the presence of a 15,000-strong UN peacekeeping force certainly aided economic development and helped to keep civil strife under control.