

Peewee Flomku/AP



Ma Ellen ... branded the 'Iron Lady' even before she had been inaugurated, Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has said she will bring maternal nurturing qualities to help heal the wounds of the 14-year-long civil war that brutalised the country.

# Presidential power shift

## The rise of women in politics

**For the first time in recorded history, women concurrently wield power in key regions around the globe. Hopes are high that an increased measure of feminine sensitivity will help restore balance to the global picture. AYESHA KAJEE reports.**

**T**he January 15th inauguration of Liberia's Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as Africa's first democratically-elected woman head of state has irrevocably altered the previously all-male character of presidential power on the continent.

Indeed, together with recent events such as Michelle Bachelet's election as President of Chile and Angela Merkel becoming Germany's Chancellor, it heralds a new wave of female leaders internationally. For the first time in recorded history, women concurrently wield power in key regions around the globe, with Gloria Arroyo as President of the Philippines since 2001, Tarja Halonen recently re-elected as President of Finland and New Zealanders having voted Helen Clark to an unprecedented third term as Prime Minister.

Clark has also been nominated by a global women's group as a possible successor to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, a position that, to date, has never been occupied by a female.

Leaders in the lingering bastions of patriarchy throughout the world are being forced, albeit grudgingly in some cases, to acknowledge and negotiate with their female counterparts as peers. Furthermore, while a number of those male leaders have attained or maintained power through military coups, dictatorships and other undemocratic means, citizens who are free to

choose are increasingly voting women into power.

Johnson-Sirleaf, Bachelet, Clark and Merkel have all attained their rank through democratic means, and while Arroyo came to power via a 'civil society revolution' in 2001, she retained the presidency in the 2004 general election. The surge in ballots favouring female leaders has been attributed to the fact that more women are enfranchised than ever before, but opinion polls from Chile to Liberia indicate that voters are inclined to cast their ballots in favour of the candidate whom they believe is best equipped for the job, regardless of gender.

These women bring a wealth of experience to their jobs, as well as impressive educational qualifications in diverse fields. While Clark, Arroyo and Johnson-Sirleaf had the foresight to study politics, economics and public administration respectively, Bachelet is a medical doctor who has also studied military history and

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Merkel holds a doctorate in quantum physics.

Clark and Arroyo have had time to put their individual stamps on their countries, with New Zealand enjoying high levels of economic growth and pursuing a determinedly independent foreign policy under the Clark administration; and Arroyo pursuing a controversial policy of 'holiday economics', where public holidays are manipulated to form long weekends.

The world is waiting to see whether Bachelet, Merkel and Johnson-Sirleaf will wield their newfound power wisely. In Latin America and Africa especially, women are hoping that their sister-leaders will unlock the chains that have bound them to patriarchal institutions and social norms entrenched over generations.

Divorce was only introduced into Catholic-dominated Chile last year; while in Liberia women and girls have been debased by rape and forced conscription during the 14-year-long civil war. Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf have the 'struggle credentials' to garner citizen support – they have suffered jail and torture during the repressive regimes of Pinochet in Chile and Doe in Liberia, and both women have been exiled from their countries at different points.

But they also have in common the experience

of being mothers, of raising children in uncertain times, and it is perhaps this experience that could significantly differentiate their presidencies from those of their male predecessors.

The Liberian president has already gone on record as saying that she will bring feminine sensitivity and maternal nurturing qualities to help heal the wounds of the conflict that brutalised Liberia's population until 2003. Hailing her victory as a victory for all African women, she told a west African women's group: "I am excited by the potential of what I represent, the aspirations and expectations of women in Liberia, African women and women all over the world."

Liberian trader and former rebel fighter Black Diamond says: "All women despite our political affiliations (must) rally around her (Sirleaf) to ensure that her administration is successful. I am very sure that she will bring change in Liberia."

Mariama Sarnor, a fruit seller and mother of six, told a news agency that she is confident the new president can make "the country better by fighting corruption".

Similarly, Chilean women have specific expectations of Bachelet: Maria Fuentealba, a 49-year-old maid, said a woman president "will protect women who are beaten by their husbands and will create more nurseries where women can leave their children and be able to get jobs". And Teresa Boj Jonas, a former Bachelet employee, comments that "Michelle makes you feel like we did it together."

Bachelet is expected to move the country away from confrontational politics towards inclusiveness, and her tolerance and capacity to

Linda A. Cierro/AP



Condoleezza Rice became the first black female Secretary of State in the US in January 2005.

Jorge Saenz/AP



Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, a medical doctor who has also studied military history.



rise above the personal have already been demonstrated when she publicly forgave her father's torturers.

Both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf have vowed to encourage women to seek high office, with Bachelet promising at a pre-election meeting: "Fifty percent of my cabinet are going to be women".

International, continental and regional caucuses, from Beijing to Brazzaville, have called for greater political participation by women. From the United Nations' Millenium Development Goals to the African Charter on Human Rights, there is consensus that enhancing women's access to political power can accelerate socio-economic change in developing countries.

In 2003, Rwanda placed African women in the spotlight by achieving a world record of 49% women in parliament, displacing Sweden from the top of the log. In the post-genocide era, Rwandese women have also been prominent in justice and reconciliation efforts, with both the Supreme Court and the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission being headed by females. The country's women have succeeded in strengthening land inheritance laws and in passing legislation that improves access to potable water. Water collection is a time-consuming burden borne that greatly adds to women's unpaid labour throughout the developing world.

Although there is still a dearth of women in high office on the continent, the Liberian presidency is the culmination of a number of recent firsts for African women in the corridors of power. Last year saw Deputy President

## Many still blame the perceived lack of community spirit in Britain on Thatcher's legacy.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka named the first woman to hold South Africa's second-highest office, while Luisa Dias Diogo became Mozambique's first female Prime Minister in 2004, and has been named as a possible presidential candidate for the future. In 2004 Kenyan environmentalist and cabinet minister Wangari Maathai became the first African woman to be awarded a Nobel peace prize, and from 2003 to 2005 Senegal's Marie-Angelique Savane served as the first female chair of the African Peer Review Panel of Eminent Persons.

In 1997, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) committed itself to a 30% representation of women in politics by 2005. While this has not been achieved in all SADC countries, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania have exceeded the target, while Mauritius, which was at the bottom of the SADC log prior to its 2005 election, has improved its rating from 5,7% female MPs to 17%.

Closer to home, in December last year South Africa's national Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), concerned at the low representation of women in local government (only 28% of councillors in 2000 were women), adopted a Declaration on a National Agenda for Women in Politics. It aims to both prepare

Jackie Clausen/Sunday Times



Luisa Dias Diogo became Mozambique's first female Prime Minister in 2004.

Stephen Hirt/AP



The original Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990.

women for political participation and to develop strategies to overcome obstacles to their entry into politics.

The IEC's Pansy Tlakula commented that women's participation not only serves the interests of women, "but will also change the definition, distribution and deployment of political, social and economic power and resources in the country".

This overarching benefit of women's empowerment was echoed by the 2005 annual report of the UN Population Fund, which maintains that "investments in gender equality and reproductive health offer multiple rewards that can accelerate social and economic progress, with lasting impact on future generations".

The ascendancy of women heads of state need not necessarily be serendipitous. Indeed, previous women presidents have been known for their aggression and their reluctance to promote other women, with Britain's Margaret Thatcher and Israel's Golda Meir included in this category by some commentators.

Margaret Thatcher has the dubious honour of igniting the Falklands War and was dubbed the 'Iron Lady' by the popular press. Given that Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has also been tagged with this nickname, it is to be hoped that she does not come to share the sentiments of its original bearer, who once famously declared, "there is no such thing as society ... (only) individual men and women ... and families".

More than 15 years on, many still blame the

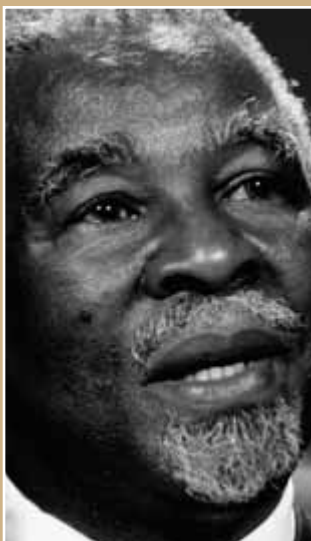
perceived lack of community spirit in Britain on Thatcher's legacy. Since such a legacy is certainly the antithesis of what Liberia and Africa currently require, thus it may be prudent to substitute the 'Iron Lady' tag with the more nurturing 'Ma Ellen'. Perceptions after all, have a nasty habit of becoming reality.

It is perhaps both apt and curiously ironic that President Johnson-Sirleaf's inauguration coincided with the US holiday honouring civil rights leader Martin Luther King – apt because Liberia, Africa's oldest republic, was founded in 1847 by former American slaves seeking freedom from exploitation and discrimination – and ironic because, over the past 160 years, Americo-Liberians have perpetuated similar abuses of human rights among Liberia's indigenous population, most recently during Charles Taylor's regime, when hostilities claimed a quarter of a million lives. Even the transitional government, responsible for the country's stewardship between 2003 and the elections last year, has allegedly defrauded the citizens of profits from Liberia's natural resources of oil and diamonds.

The array of challenges that Johnson-Sirleaf faces, from issues of ensuring human security to those of building state security, are daunting to say the least. They will require a judicious blend of toughness and sensitivity that may well be contained in that rare phenomenon – a female president.

There are hints that influential nations around the globe may be preparing to follow in the footsteps of Liberia, Chile and Germany.

**South African President Thabo Mbeki is an ardent promoter of the rights of African women. Might he leave South Africans with their first female president when he completes his second term in 2009? Possible candidates include ...**



Mlambo-Ngcuka



Dlamini-Zuma



Hendricks



Mabandla



Pandor



Fraser-Moloketi



Tshabalala-Msimang



Mapisa-Nqakula



Didiza



De Lille

PictureNet

US First Lady Laura Bush, prior to attending Johnson-Sirleaf's inauguration in January, predicted that the USA would have its first female president "probably in the next few terms". Mrs Bush said that she would support the candidature of Condoleezza Rice, but Dr Rice herself has denied that she wants the post in 2008. Nonetheless, Americans are keenly anticipating a possible 'all-woman' battle for the next presidential race, between the Republican Rice and former First Lady Hilary Clinton, who is currently Senator for New York State.

Closer to home, there are those who foresee that President Mbeki, an ardent promoter of the rights of African women, will leave South Africans with their first female president when he completes his second term. Given that his current deputy, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, has been beset by allegations of imprudent use of public monies, she may be left out of the running for the top job. Barring a massive drop in public confidence, the ANC is likely to maintain its majority in 2009, and there are several other potential candidates in the current South African cabinet.

While Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma currently leads the pack in the key Foreign Affairs portfolio, other women in influential positions include Lindiwe Hendricks from Minerals and Energy, Justice Minister Bridget Mabandla, Education Minister Naledi Pandor and Geraldine Fraser-Moloketi of Public Service. The latter ministry has been designated South Africa's focal point for the African Peer Review Mechanism, widely regarded as Nepal's litmus test of governance and accountability.

Unlikely contenders are Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula of Home Affairs, whose ministries have been plagued by controversy. Minister of Land Affairs Thoko Didiza, while rather young for the top job, may well move up the rankings if she successfully delivers on land restitution following renewed focus on this issue in the President's 2006 State of the Nation address. Outside the ANC, Patricia de Lille, leader of the Independent Democrats, has a wide following, but her party is unlikely to make sufficient inroads into the ANC's election base to make her a credible contender.

There are still three years to South Africa's 2009 election, and much may change in that time, with the field being open enough to admit newcomers. Should the 2008 US and 2009 SA elections both yield female heads of state, though, it will be interesting to track the parallels between them.

## The latest stats on women parliamentarians

In 2005, one out of every five people elected to parliament across the world was a woman.

By the end of 2005, 16,3% of all members of parliament world-wide were women.

And in 20 parliaments, the proportion of women now exceeds 30% – the target set by the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995.

The latest report on women parliamentarians, released by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in February, shows that developing countries, particularly those that have emerged from conflict, are integrating women more readily than older established democracies.

Of the 20 countries with the biggest proportion of women in parliament, five are in Africa, and only 10 are in Europe. In fact, when analysed from a gender perspective, many countries that pride themselves on being established democracies were found to be "not democratic at all". The United Kingdom, for example, ranked number 50; the United States was at 69; and France came in at number 85.

The Nordic countries remain in the lead, with 40%, while the Arab states are at the other end of the extreme, with around 8%.

Established in 1889 as the global organisation of Parliaments of Sovereign States, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, and lists its 'Democracy through Partnership between Men and Women' initiative as "one main area of activity".

Recent improvements in gender equality have been helped along by quotas and other proactive measures that have been introduced in many countries, together with growing international awareness.

Just as the US is accused of being the economic and political hegemon of the global arena, South Africa has faced similar criticism on the African continent. Whether a female leader could successfully alter those perceptions, in either America or South Africa, remains to be seen.

In the interim, it is to be hoped that the efforts of female leaders in Africa and outside will lead to an improvement in the lives of the hitherto neglected half of Africa's citizens. And, perhaps, with better development and use of this enormous human resource, Africa herself will move faster towards peace and prosperity.

While the world's women hail the rise of 'Ma Ellen' and her peers in Chile and elsewhere, they will be critically anticipating improvements at grassroots level as vindication of their confidence. ■