

RECONCILIATION POLICY SPEECH

By

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Fellow Partisans
My fellow Liberians
Ladies and Gentlemen

Nine years ago, I served as the keynote speaker at our country's Independence Day Celebration in New York City. During that occasion, I reminded my audience of the magnitude of the challenges the country faced. I said, in part:

"... our task today is by far greater and the challenges more daunting, than it was for the founding fathers. The challenge of twenty first century Liberia is neither to create a home for a certain group of people, nor to demarcate territorial boundaries, but to develop all groups of Liberians into a community of people, to build a nation we can all call home - a place where the rights of every individual are protected, and responsibilities of all are clearly defined."

Our nation was founded upon the ideals of *establishing justice, ensuring domestic peace, and promoting the general welfare of all*. The fact that those ideals have remained unfulfilled is common knowledge. Throughout the history of our country, Liberians have been divided as "Country" and "Congo" and along tribal lines, with the use of misnomers like "Americo-Liberians" and "Natives" or "Indigenous". And an attempt to address this divisive politics through the Military Coup d'état of April 12, 1980, created other problems, which eventually led to a full-blown civil war, aggravating our divisions and exacerbating the lack of a common national purpose.

The country's 14-year civil war turned neighbors into enemies, strained ethnic relationships, destroyed the country's meager infrastructure, and left us a seriously wounded people. This national tragedy robbed our nation of the progress it had made. Today, our population is less healthy than thirty years ago and a generation of Liberians has been deprived of the opportunity to obtain the education and marketable skills they need to make a decent living. For the first time in our history, parents are generally more educated than their children.

Although Liberians are grateful that the guns, which sent thousands of their fellow Liberians to their early graves are silent, let not the silence deceive us into settling for a false sense of security. Those who are tempted to accept a delusion only need to remember the historical fact that before the beginning of our country's nightmare, our nation appeared calm. In fact, most of the rest of the world often pointed to Liberia then, as one of the most stable countries on the African continent. Of course, Liberians knew better! We knew all along that the country was a powder keg waiting to explode. Many Liberians were angry because they were treated as "second class citizens" in their own country; they saw justice administered selectively; they

watched their children being brutally beaten and abused; and they saw the majority of Liberians excluded from the affairs of their country, and shackled in abject poverty.

Today, Liberians do not need to be told that not much has changed—that many Liberians are hurting and angry again. They are hurting and angry because of the atrocities they suffered during the civil war. They are hurting and angry because they see the very things that were used as justifications for the war—corruption, nepotism, patronage, miscarriage of justice, elitism, children being brutally beaten and abused by police, among others—happening now, but on an even grander scale. Liberians are angry because their country's resources continue to benefit just a few. The country continues to be two distinct nations, constrained to co-exist as one—one Liberia of the rich and well-to-do, and the other Liberia of the poor, underprivileged, and marginalized.

As we acknowledge the ugly situation of our country, we must muster the strength to move forward and build a new Liberia that makes up for the losses, ensuring that Liberians live together, as the one people we truly are. Liberia must change and the people must be reconciled!

Unfortunately, the country has not made significant progress in this area. After expending enormous resources in manhours and money over a period of three years, the report and recommendations of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) have now been consigned to the shelf. This sad state of affairs was engendered by one recommendation that the TRC made. In assigning responsibilities for the civil war, the Commission named President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as one of the sponsors of the war and recommended that she, along with 48 others, be publicly sanctioned and barred from holding public office for a period of 30 years. This single recommendation sealed the fate of the Commission's work; work that covered very critical areas of Liberia's national life; areas that need to be dealt with in order to address the root causes of the country's tragedy, advance reconciliation, and promote sustainable peace. Regrettably, the TRC's work ended unceremoniously and the national reconciliation process left in limbo.

So, on the eve of Liberia's second post-conflict national elections, Liberians are generally asking the same questions concerning our national reconciliation: Why have we made so little progress towards achieving this very crucial part of nation-building? How can the national reconciliation agenda be moved forward in a timely and holistic manner? It is answers to these questions that will fundamentally underpin a Liberty Party Government's National Reconciliation Policy.

To that end, Liberty Party releases today its Reconciliation Policy Paper, which we will make available to the general public in the print media and on the Internet. This speech merely summarizes a comprehensive program to finally address the critical elements of national reconciliation. By focusing first on reconciliation we sound the clarion call, that our current façade of national wellbeing, where we celebrate slogans and hope on symbolism, cannot be sustained.

Closure to the Formal Reconciliation Process

Liberty Party believes that the work of the TRC does not only represent a comprehensive treatment of the nation's problems, but it is also a valuable contribution towards a national policy-making process that will support the long-term peace, stability and development of our country. A Liberty Party Government will, therefore, commit to ensuring that the Commission's work is given the national attention that it deserves.

Guided by our deep appreciation of the complexities of the country's tragedy and the frailty of our nation's attempt at democracy, we will expeditiously bring closure to the formal process of reconciliation by reviewing the recommendations of the Commission, with the goal of implementing the *non*-punitive provisions. A Liberty Party Government will make every effort to build national consensus as the reconciliation process moves forward, being mindful of the particularities of the country's civil conflict.

We will take advantage of the Palava Hut concept of the Commission's recommendations as a way of building national consensus and advancing national reconciliation; not necessarily dealing with the major actors of the civil war, but with individuals and groups that will facilitate achieving lasting reconciliation and peace in our country. As President, I will solicit the involvement of local leaders and traditional elders in this effort.

A Liberty Party Government will memorialize and honor the country's war dead, through National Remembrance Symbols to include such things as a National Day of Remembrance, national monuments, reconciliation feasts, among others. Currently, these war dead cannot be honored during the nation's Decoration Day since they have no known graves to be visited and decorated.

For Liberia to have a secure, stable, and peaceful environment the issue of the ex-combatants must be addressed in a significant way; they must cease to be fighters-for-hire. Of late, there have been accounts of some of them returning to the battlefield. Many news reports revealed that Liberian ex-combatants were, for example, recently involved in the post-election crisis of La Cote d'Ivoire. These men and women will be offered an opportunity to be integrated in the restructured Armed Forces of Liberia. Of course, they will not be recruited into combat units of the Armed Forces, but will be enlisted in the auxiliary battalions, such as the agriculture, engineering, and medical battalions. These new "soldiers" would not be allowed to handle or otherwise come in contact with weapons. The military, instead, will be used as a vehicle for rehabilitating them through the discipline and regiment of the Armed Forces. They will be trained as technicians, taught to become productive citizens, and then discharged into civilian life.

. Our reconciliation effort would not be complete without a policy that addresses the issue of hundreds of thousands of Liberians lingering in the Diaspora unable to make a full legal transition back home. When sustained and relentless violence started in Liberia, many of our citizens fled to protect their lives and the lives of their family members. Many of them reached places of safety in neighboring countries. Still many others went to Europe, America, and other faraway places. In order to escape economic deprivation and/or social and political discrimination in their places of refuge, some of those Liberians obtained citizenship of other countries. We must now make it easier for those who wish to return to be able to do so, as

Liberian citizens. Our citizenship laws will be reformed so that Liberians who obtained citizenship in other countries during periods when the Liberian Constitution was suspended would not have automatically lost their citizenship, with its attendant rights and privileges.

A Generational Perspective

A Liberty Party Government's national reconciliation agenda will target the young people of our country with programs, which shall include the following:

- Revise the government's scholarship program with the view of establishing a "Student Service Corps," which will provide scholarships for students to attend public universities, colleges, and technical/trade schools. The beneficiaries will be required to work in rural Liberia during their annual vacations. Students will be assigned to counties other than their home counties, as a way of enhancing the unification and reconciliation process. These university students will conduct vacation schools for grade school children and work in offices of the chiefs, among other activities. The nation's young people from the different counties of the country will be engaged in ways—learning each other languages and culture—that will engender trust among the people of Liberia, thereby alleviating historical prejudices and stereotypes that often cause Liberians to demonize each other.
- Strengthen the existing national sports program to bring the country's young people together on regional and national levels as a way of building friendships and trust across tribal and sectarian divides.
- Teach Liberian languages in the schools with the goal of adopting a national language—a language that has some connection with Liberia and the Liberian people.
- Revise school curriculums to reintroduce the teaching of Liberian civics and democratic principles, as a way of instilling civic values and tolerance in the nation's young people at early ages.
- Seek, through workshops, seminars, and other programs, to discourage such artificial and unhelpful dichotomies as "Progressives" versus "Reactionaries," "Congo" versus "Country," "Americo-Liberians" versus "Natives," "This man" versus "That man," "They" versus "Us," among others.

Reconciliation for Economic Growth

Along with healing the wounds of the civil war and dealing with our historical divide and prejudices, a Liberty Party Government will work diligently to reduce the economic disparities that exist in the country. Reconciling the wide gap between the haves and have-nots in Liberia is crucial to the long-term peace and stability of our country. Liberia is rich in natural resources, but 95% of Liberians live on US\$1.00 or less a day. The majority of Liberians lives in poverty, and is generally out of the reach of opportunities to make a meaningful transition. It is clear that Liberia will not become a stable and peaceful society if this state of affairs persists.

Our economic recovery program will be based on the understanding that peace, harmony, and development will only be assured if an environment is created that gives all Liberians equal access to the opportunities that the country has to offer. A Liberty Party Government will begin by empowering historically disadvantaged citizens—rural dwellers and women—to increase their earning capacity and enhance their stake in the nation, thereby breaking the cycle of poverty.

Our economic policy paper shall address this issue fully.

Conciliation and National Integration

The ultimate goal of a Liberty Party Government's reconciliation agenda will be to expedite the reconciliation process in order to achieve a genuinely reconciled, democratic Liberia, where everyone, irrespective of age, sex, gender, ethnicity, tribe, education, religion, or political beliefs and affiliation, will live in peace and be treated equally. A Liberty Party Government will, therefore, take the following measures to facilitate conciliation and national integration:

- Immediately upon assuming office, we will issue an Executive Order directing that, given the abundance of uninhabited land in our country, no person, concessionaire or non-concessionaire, would be allowed to dispossess village dwellers of their ancestral homeland to plant rubber trees or to harvest forest timber. Also, government officials and other urban elites who, by virtue of their status, attempt to possess land that rural dwellers would otherwise need for farming, would be prohibited.
- We will undertake such interim measures as allowed under existing laws, until major land reform laws are enacted, ensuring, among other things, that Liberians living on "public land" within the interior of the country, whose affairs are still governed by customary law, would be issued fee simple deeds for the land on which they live. This would give the majority of Liberians a stake in their country, as well as empower them economically.
- Our government will encourage and even induce Liberians, especially those returning from exile, and village dwellers who have, as a result of the war, taken residence in urban cities, to own and develop land in areas other than their counties of origin, as we strive to develop into a nation of citizens, and not a collection of ethnic groups.
- We will introduce a new social protection net so that older Liberians, who have not made the transition into the monetary economy, will be allowed some form of old age benefit during their twilight years. Elderly citizens, who are not within the monetary sector of the economy or who may not have contributed to the social security fund, will be grandfathered into the social security system.
- A national policy will be developed for Liberians with disabilities—the blind, the deaf, amputees and other physically challenged individuals, as well as the mentally challenged. Disabled Liberians can also contribute to the rebuilding of our nation. A Liberty Party Government will also work to assist these Liberians with special need to acquire marketable

skills and gainful employment, and in the long run make access to public buildings and facilities easier.

- We will integrate our dual legal systems that we have developed along parallel lines since President Arthur Barclay's Interior Plan of 1904. Under a Liberty Party Government, whether a Liberian lives under customary law or statutory law, everyone will enjoy the same rights and privileges. For example, the Supreme Court of Liberia will be the final arbiter of all litigations, as provided for under our Constitution, and not the President. Currently, the President of Liberia, by law, in addition to being the Chief Executive, is also the Chief Judge as to all civil matters arising under customary law. That will be changed!
- A Liberty Party Government will foster religious tolerance, ensuring that all religions are respected and honored in accordance with the dictate of the Constitution of Liberia. All persons, in the practice of their religion, shall be entitled to the protection of the law. We will enact laws that will treat as hate crime, a special category of criminal sanction, the burning or other destruction of churches, mosques, kingdom halls, or other places of worship.
- We will harmonize our national symbols with the values and complete history of our country. A Liberty Party Government will, within the first six months of coming into office, establish a commission, representing every county and ethnic group to review our national symbols—flag, motto, and seal—and the names of major cities, among others things, with the view of strengthening the national integration and unity of the people of Liberia, into one body politic, regardless of place of origin, ethnic, regional or other differences.
- We will honor all of our heroes and teach a history of our country that tells the story of all of our people. A Liberty Party Government will, within the first six months of coming into office, establish a commission to conduct comprehensive research and study of the Liberian story, with the view of discovering contributions made by all Liberians, especially non-repatriates, and identifying ethnic heroes and heroines who contributed in shaping the history of our country. The goal of the research will be to ensure our history immortalizes all of our heroes and tells the story of all of our people.

Conclusion

Liberty Party has a dream and a vision, greater than slogans, larger than symbols, and more meaningful than “feel good” pet talks: a dream where all Liberians live in harmony, proud to be one people, and striving to be our brothers' keepers.

In order to demonstrate our commitment to reconciling Liberians, and the urgency that we attach to such a great national endeavor, a Liberty Party government will create a cabinet level position in the office of the President to plan and coordinate the implementation of policies and strategies articulated in our Reconciliation Policy Paper, which will be adopted as the official reconciliation policy of a Liberty Party Government.

My fellow Liberians, we therefore ask you to join us in reconciling all Liberians; because living, working, and playing together, as a reconciled and unified people, we will do better, as a nation.

May God bless us all and save the nation. I thank you.