

**ANNUAL MESSAGE BY HIS EXCELLENCY, PRESIDENT GEORGE MANNEH  
WEAH, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA TO THE 54<sup>TH</sup>  
NATIONAL LEGISLISTURE – MONDAY, JANUARY 29, 2018**

Madam Vice President and President of the Senate;

Mr. Speaker;

Mr. President Pro-Tempore;

Honorable Members of the Legislature;

Your Honor the Chief Justice, Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and Members of the Judiciary;

The Dean and Members of the Cabinet and other Government Officials;

The Doyen, Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps;

Your Excellency, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Liberia;

The Officers and Staff of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL);

Mr. Chief of Staff, Men and Women of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL);

Former Officials of Government;

Traditional Leaders, Chiefs and Elders;

Political and Business Leaders;

Religious Leaders;

Officers and Members of the National Bar Association;

Labor and Trade Unions;

Civil Society Organizations;

Members of the Press;

Special Guests;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Fellow Liberians:

What a privilege and honor to have her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf here gracing this occasion. Madam, WELCOME. Your presence here today shows how far we have come as people.

### **HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE 54<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE**

I stand before you today, under the mandate of Article 58 of the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia, which places a duty on the President of the Republic, on the 4<sup>th</sup> Monday of January every year, to present the administration's legislative program for the ensuing session of this Honorable Legislature, and to report to the Liberian people, through you, their duly elected representatives, in Joint Assembly, on the State of the Republic.

Before I commence to do so, I would first of all like to thank the Almighty God for His bountiful goodness and abundant mercies that He has bestowed upon us as a Nation and as a People. With His steady hands, he has guided our Ship of State through stormy seas and contrary winds, and has brought us safely to a calm and peaceful shore, where we can find refuge and strength.

### **HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE 54<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE**

Exactly one week ago, we witnessed and participated in an historic and peaceful transition from an incumbent administration to a newly elected government, the first such event in our history for more than 70 years. Liberians have received commendations and congratulations from all over the world for the civility and maturity demonstrated throughout this long process, which eventually ended in the passing of the *baton* from one generation of leadership to a younger generation.

And so it came to pass, as a result of this process, that I, George Manneh Weah, your humble servant, took the Oath of Office and was sworn in as the 24<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of Liberia, in the presence of most – if not all – of you. I swore that I would preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of Liberia. And, in the process, I asked the Almighty God to help me to do so, to the best of my abilities.

And this is exactly what I intend to do. The Liberian Constitution, which is the Supreme Law of the Republic, and with which I am intimately familiar, shall be my principal guide for leadership and governance throughout my tenure as President. Without pretending to be a constitutional scholar, expert, or lawyer, I have found direction, as well as inspiration, from studying it. I would humbly advise all of you Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen, and indeed – all Liberians -- to study your Constitution well, for I find it to be the most useful and practical guide for those who would govern, and for those who are governed.

My assumption is that not everyone is familiar with the Constitution, as they ought to be. I will now beg your indulgence to allow me to make frequent references to it today as I address you. In some instances I will read extensively from it.

#### **HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:**

What is expected of us, who have been elected by our people to govern them? What is really expected of those of us who have been entrusted with the responsibility to lead them? The answer is to be found in Chapter 2 of our Constitution, from which I shall now read selected articles extensively and verbatim:

#### **Chapter II**

#### **General Principles of National Policy**

#### **Article 4**

The principles contained in this Chapter shall be fundamental in the governance of the Republic and shall serve as guidelines in the formulation of legislative, executive and administrative directives, policy-making and their execution.

#### **Article 5**

The Republic shall:

- a) aim at strengthening the national integration and unity of the people of Liberia, regardless of ethnic, regional or other differences, into one body politic; and the

Legislature shall enact laws promoting national unification, and the encouragement of all citizens to participate in government;

- b) preserve, protect and promote positive Liberian culture, ensuring that traditional values which are compatible with public policy and national progress are adopted and developed, as an integral part of the growing needs of the Liberian society;
- c) take steps, by appropriate legislation and executive orders, to eliminate sectionalism and tribalism, and such abuses of power as the misuse of government resources, nepotism and all other corrupt practices.

#### **Article 6**

The Republic shall, because of the vital role assigned to the individual citizen under this Constitution for the social, economic and political well being of Liberia, provide equal access to educational opportunities and facilities for all citizens to the extent of available resources.

Emphasis shall be placed on the mass education of the Liberian people and the elimination of illiteracy.

#### **Article 7**

The Republic shall, consistent with the principles of individual freedom and social justice enshrined in this Constitution, manage the national economy and the natural resources of Liberia in such manner as shall ensure the maximum feasible participation of Liberian citizens under conditions of equality, so as to advance the general welfare of the Liberian people and the economic development of Liberia.

#### **Article 8**

The Republic shall direct its policy towards ensuring for all citizens, without discrimination, opportunities for employment and livelihood under just and humane conditions, and towards promoting safety, health and welfare facilities in employment.

#### **Article 9**

The Republic shall encourage the promotion of bilateral and regional cooperation between and among Liberia and other nations, and the formation and maintenance of regional organizations aimed at the cultural, social, political and economic development of the peoples of Africa and other nations of the world.

#### **Article 10**

The Republic shall ensure the publication and dissemination of this Constitution throughout the Republic, and the teaching of its principles and provisions in all institutions of learning in Liberia.

**HONOURABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE 54<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE:**

This is the backdrop against which the legislative program of my administration shall be proposed for your kind consideration. And you will soon discover, upon closer examination, that Chapter 2 of our Constitution forms the essential framework for the formulation of the political manifesto and platform upon which I – and many of you – ran and won during the just needed elections.

It is customary that the State of the Nation address gives an account of the President's stewardship of the Government for the previous year, and then sets out his legislative agenda for the ensuing session. Additionally, the President is expected to present the overall economic condition of the nation, which should cover both expenditure and revenue.

In this regard, as I have been President for only one week, I cannot be expected to report with authority on the expenditure and income of the Government of Liberia for the previous year, which was administered under my predecessor. Of course, during the transition process, certain information has been provided to us on both income and expenditure, containing balances, which we now inherit to carry forward.

Total revenues collected in calendar year 2017 amounted to 489.1 million US Dollars, which is a 13 percent decline over revenue collected in 2016, which was 565.1 million.

I cannot vouch for the accuracy or completeness of this information, in the absence of verification by a full and proper audit conducted by a competent authority.

This highly unusual situation is caused by the delays in the recent electoral process, which had the effect of reducing the transition period from three months to three weeks.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the above-described situation, it is possible to inform you that the state of the economy that my administration has inherited, leaves a lot to be desired. This is plain for all to see, for we are all affected by it. Our economy is broken, our government is

broke, our currency is in free-fall, inflation is rising, unemployment is at an unprecedented high, and our foreign reserves are at an all-time low.

### **HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:**

This is the challenge that we face. In order to overcome these constraints and reverse these trends, we, the Executive, will have to work in close collaboration with you, the Legislature, as separate, but coordinate branches of Government, to find solutions to these obstacles to our progress and development.

During the course of this session, we shall propose and introduce appropriate legislation for your consideration and approval, that will be based on the four pillars of our platform, namely:

### **PILLAR ONE: POWER TO THE PEOPLE**

We shall focus on reviews and revision of our education system, improve health and sanitation, promote and strengthen gender equality, and provide for youth re-orientation and empowerment through training of all kinds, the creation of jobs, and the expansion of sports.

As Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” The improvement of our education system is and shall I remain a constant and major priority during my administration.

For example, I made a promise that my Government will absorb the WAEC fees for all 12<sup>th</sup> graders, and I remain committed to that promise. My government has already started to disburse these fees by committing an initial amount of two hundred thousand US dollars.

### **PILLAR TWO: ECONOMY AND JOBS**

We will introduce new legislation and policies which will be intended to achieve sustainable economic growth, develop and expand agriculture, and address our very large infrastructure deficit, with particular emphasis on road construction and the provision of affordable and adequate electricity for all our people.

### **PILLAR THREE: SUSTAINING THE PEACE**

Under this pillar, we shall examine ways to improve the judiciary system to ensure that the basic rights of all Liberians are protected. To that end, we will propose legislation that will be intended to create new processes and avenues to ensure that all our people are fully reconciled.

In terms of security and defense, we will rely on your budgetary support to enable us to continue to improve the professional and operational development of the Armed Forces of Liberia, and other security agencies, in order to better prepare them to participate in the fight against global terrorism. In this regard, we will specially focus on the housing constraints faced by our security personnel.

### **PILLAR FOUR: GOVERNANCE AND TRANSPARENCY**

We will request you to draft legislation that will focus on the decentralization of institutions and systems of governance, review and build upon the current Code of Conduct in order to increase accountability of public officials and reduce the incidence of corruption.

In an effort to make Government more efficient, we will submit to you, a draft legislation to re-structure the cabinet of the Executive branch to make our Ministries more effective in addressing the specific requirements of our various sectors.

### **HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:**

What I have just presented to you is a broad and general indication of our legislative program. However, and more specifically, I would like to inform you that my immediate strategy for reducing poverty, increasing youth empowerment through job creation and training, and improving the productivity of our economy, is to embark upon a comprehensive road and highway construction program that will link all county capitals with all-weather paved primary roads.

They will be built to the highest international standards, and linked to paved secondary farm-to-market roads that will enhance agriculture, trade, and tourism in Liberia. Particular priority will be given to a coastal highway that will run from Buchanan to Harper, which will eventually end

the complete isolation of south-eastern Liberia, a condition that has existed since the formation of this country.

There is a medium-term project which will take several years to complete, but it is the intention of my government to prioritize the planning and raising of funding for this important development goal, which has been estimated to cost approximately three billion dollars. This is going to be very challenging, but I am convinced that, with the assistance of friendly governments and institutions, this can be achieved before the end of my tenure.

### **HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:**

I would now like to address you on what I consider to be my most urgent and imperative agenda.

Since the founding of this country in 1847, more than 170 years ago, there have been certain restrictions on citizenship and property ownership that – in my view – have become serious impediments to the development and progress of this country. These restrictions include the limitation of citizenship only to black people, the limitation of property ownership exclusively to citizens, and the non-allowance of dual citizenship.

### **Limitation of Citizenship only to Black People**

The framers of the 1847 constitution may have had every reason and justification to include these restrictions in that historic document. In their own words:

“The great object of forming these Colonies, being to provide a home for the dispersed and oppressed children of Africa, and to regenerate and enlighten this benighted continent, none but persons of color shall be admitted to citizenship in this Republic.”

They, as freed slaves, were fleeing from the oppressive yoke of slavery imposed upon them by white slave owners. They therefore wanted Liberia to be “...a refuge and a haven for freed men of color”, and so they restricted citizenship only to black people.

This may have been appropriate for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and for the threats and conditions that existed at that time.

However, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I am of the view that these threats no longer exist, and that these conditions have changed. In these circumstances, it is my view that keeping such a clause in our constitution is unnecessary, racist, and inappropriate for the place that Liberia occupies today in the comity of nations.

It also contradicts the very definition of Liberia, which is derived from the Latin word “*liber*,” Meaning “Liberty.” I believe that we should have nothing to fear from people of any other race becoming citizen of Liberia, once they conform to the requirements of our Immigration and Naturalization Laws, as maybe appropriately amended to address this new situation.

In fact, we have everything to gain. If we look in our region amongst the other member states of ECOWAS, especially our neighbors in La Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana, it will soon be observed that permitting people of other races to become citizens has not marginalized their indigenes.

I believe that this is an anomaly that should not have found its way into the 1986 Constitution - Chapter 4, Article 27. I therefore strongly recommend and propose, respectfully, that consideration should be given to removing it by appropriate measures provided for in our laws for amending the Constitution [Chapter 12].

### **Restriction of Land Ownership Exclusively to Citizens**

The second provision in our Constitution which tends today to impede our progress and stunt our growth and development is the restriction of land ownership only to Liberian citizens [Article 22-a].

No foreign investor – in fact, not any investor – will be willing to make significant direct investments in our country if they cannot own property in fee simple. Furthermore, direct investments placed on leased properties are virtually unbankable, because most banks are reluctant to accept leaseholds as collateral for loans to persons and business entities for projects that could very well enhance our development and create jobs for our people.

It is inconsistent with my pronouncement that “Liberia is open for business”, while at the same time denying those who would heed our call and come to Liberia to invest, when they are prevented from owning property because of their lack of Liberian citizenship.

Liberian citizens are free to purchase property in any other country as non-citizens, yet our Constitution and laws will not allow similar privileges to be accorded to the citizens of other nations. I therefore strongly recommend that this restriction be removed, and that the appropriate rules and regulations of the Land Commission and other relevant agencies be amended and strengthened to accommodate this new development, if approved by referendum.

### **Dual Citizenship**

The third matter of concern to me is the restriction placed in our Constitution on Liberians holding dual citizenship.

I believe that most Liberians who are also citizens of another country probably acquired the additional nationality as a means to escape from the terrible atrocities, which characterized our civil conflict, and for economic survival in their new countries of residence. If, as a condition precedent for other countries to grant citizenship to these persons, they had to disavow their loyalty to Liberia and pledge allegiance to the laws of another country, then it could have been out of necessity, rather than a matter of the heart.

And if conditions now exist in Liberia that make them want to return home and contribute their quota to the development of our common patrimony, then I do not think that it is fair to treat them as noncitizens in the land of their birth. Many Liberians in Diaspora have heard my clarion call to return home and bring their energies, skills, talents, and expertise to join us in the building of a New Liberia.

We need them, and so long as they were born in this country, they were Liberians first, and I believe that they should be welcomed back home with open arms. Whether or not they are required to renounce their adopted nationalities, it should be a matter of their consciences and the

laws which govern their naturalization in their respective domiciles. They should be free to make those choices and decisions.

### **HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN**

We are all aware that a Constitutional Review Committee was recently established during the previous administration to review these issues, amongst others. The Report was presented to the Executive, who then duly forwarded it to you for your consideration, and, to the best of my knowledge, it is still tabled and awaiting your action. Our people spoke.

However, some of the provisions that were agreed upon are not – in my view -- in the interest of future peace and sustainable economic growth of our Nation.

If we must build a new Liberia that will unite us all and open our doors to investors, then I will respectfully request, Ladies and Gentlemen, that you re-visit the work of the Commission in light of new, and existing, realities, in the best interest of our people and Nation.

### **HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE 54<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE:**

With the assessment that I gave you earlier of the poor condition of our economy, I believe that it is appropriate that we should all make sacrifices in the interest of our country. According to Article 60 of the Constitution, the salaries of the President and the Vice President are established by the Legislature, and cannot be increased or reduced during the period for which they are elected.

However, in view of the very rapidly deteriorating situation of the economy, I am informing you today, with immediate effect, that I will reduce my salary and benefits by 25% and give the proceeds back to the Consolidated Fund for allocation and appropriation as they see fit.

In the meantime, I would wish to urge you, Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen; to follow my lead, in the interest of your constituents.

**AND SO IN CLOSING, HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE 54<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATURE,** let us all remember that we were elected to serve the Liberian people, and not to be masters over them. Let us all strive to practice servant-leadership, whereby all that we do inside and outside these Chambers as elected leaders shall be for the benefit of the Liberian people, by whose mandate we have been given this responsibility to lead them, and this opportunity to serve them.

Let us all exert our best effort to ensure that, in the cause of the people, the struggle must end!

**AND NOW, HONORABLE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,** I wish to report to you, and through you to all of your constituents, that the State of the Nation is peaceful and full of promise. We are at peace with ourselves, we are at peace with our neighbors, and we are at peace with the world. There is hope that this newly elected government will bring the change that our people deserve, and will usher in a new era of prosperity and growth.

May God bless the works of our hands, and save the State.

**I THANK YOU.**