

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN PRESERVING DEMOCRACIES IN TIMES OF CRISIS:
A SHARED GOAL OF THE UNITED STATES AND AFRICA

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Welcome and Introduction:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

GENERAL ALLEN: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. For those of you I've not yet had the honor of meeting, I'm John Allen. I'm the president of the Brookings Institution. It's a great pleasure that I welcome you today on behalf of the Institution and the Africa Growth Initiative to today's event, which is entitled, "The Role of Youth in Preserving Democracy in Times of Crisis; A Shared Goal of United States and Africa."

And before we begin and behalf on the Brookings Institution and the Brookings Africa Growth Initiative, I would like to thank President Sirleaf's organization, Emerging Public Leaders, for helping us to coordinate today's event. And of course we look forward to hearing from the president later, he will be joining us shortly. But today's topic could not be more timely with the promise of the COVID vaccine rollouts, now multiple vaccines coming online.

Both America and Africa stand on the verge of dramatic change. Life as we knew it may be coming back. However, while American and African policymakers may be eager to put the events of the global pandemic in their rearview mirrors, it would be wise to consider the legacy of the work in the coming months, especially as it will impact their countries' youths.

Defined by the United Nations as people between the ages of 15 and 24, especially in America and Africa, youths have been at the forefront in inciting transformational changes in progress in their community. During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, young voters had one of the highest turnout rates in the history of the United States.

Young Africans have also been poised to lead social and democratic reform on the continent, as seen last year with the protests in Nigeria against police brutality and with the youth activists in the Democratic Republic of Congo who were acquitted this past January. Collectively, American and African youths are standing up to -- are standing up to and fighting against those transnational threats of our time, climate change, socioeconomic inequality, transnational criminal networks. They are standing for all of us.

But still without careful consideration of their political and local leaders, American and African youths are also most susceptible to being left behind. At the moment, many American youths are

about to enter the economic state in this country, the likes of which we have not seen since the great recession, perhaps even the Great Depression.

The African continent where the median age is 18, the problem can be even more concerning. According to experts, in the next decade the number of people in the African labor market will reach to 375 million with more youths entering Africa's workforce each year than in the rest of the world combined. This growth needs to ensure that young Africans have access to critical services such as education, family planning, jobs. And all of these things become paramount as time passes. Indeed, to not harness the rapidly growing self-described youth movement and I would call it a more positive sense, the youth surge, would be a disservice to Africa's capacity to be in charge of its future and to achieve the great promise of the African continent.

Realizing this, policymakers and scholars must ask themselves, how can we uplift these young voices and create room for them during this time of renewal. And how do we do our part to ensure that the next generation, whether in the United States or in Africa, are able to continue to rise to the challenges of tomorrow and embrace the many opportunities ahead?

With us today are civil leaders who I believe will vary why have the answers to these problems. We should answer -- we should listen very carefully to their answers today. We are first deeply honored to have her excellently, the former president of Liberia, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female head of any state on the African continent. President Sirleaf notably led Liberia out of the 2014 to 2015 Ebola crisis. Also a recipient of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, she's been a longtime champion of youth and female empowerment. Today she is the cochair of the board of directors of the nonprofit emerging public leaders. Madam President, it is such an honor to have you with us today.

Joining her is Senator Chris Coons representing his home state of Delaware for over 10 years. He's become one of the leading foreign-policy voices in Congress. Currently he's both the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, as well as the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Multilateral International Development, Multilateral Institutions, and International Economic Energy and Environmental Policy, who was a longtime champion of strong U.S.-Africa relations and a dear friend of the Brookings Institution. Senator, thank you for engaging with us

today, sir.

And finally we have New York Times correspondent, Helene Cooper. In 2015 Helene was one of the recipients of the Pulitzer Prize for her international reporting specifically on her work during the Ebola epidemic in Liberia. She is also the author of several books including "Madame President: The Extraordinary Story of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf." Helene, thank you for joining us today.

And before I turn the floor over to Helene, will be moderating today's event, a brief reminder that we are very much alive and we are on the record. And should any of audience members want to pose a question to the panelists, they can contact us at events@Brookings.edu, that's events@Brookings.edu, or Tweeting at [@BrookingsGlobal](https://twitter.com/BrookingsGlobal), [@BrookingsGlobal](https://twitter.com/BrookingsGlobal) with [#YouthAndDemocracy](https://twitter.com/BrookingsGlobal).

With that, list of the floor over to Helene. The floor is yours. And I wish you all a wonderful panel today. What a great grouping this is. Thank you.

MS. COOPER: Thank you, very much, General Allen. It's a pleasure to be here with Madam President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and with Senator Chris Coons. It's not lost on me that none of the -- none of the three of us all in that classification of 15 to 25-year-old youths that you began with, General Allen. But I think we can give it a good college try anyway.

Madam President, Senator Coons, congratulations to both of you. Madam President, to you for winning yet another Forbes award on influence. And Senator Coons, congratulations to you on getting your guy into the White House and assuming control of the Senate.

So we are here to talk about democracy and young people, but first I need to take care of some current events, housecleaning, mainly the coronavirus pandemic. Not just because Madam, you are on this panel looking at the WHO response, but also because the two of you actually have a history together, Madam President and Senator Coons, of moving quickly to deal with health pandemics.

Senator Coons, the first time I ever talked to you was back in 2014 after we -- you -- I think you had just come back from a visit to Liberia in the middle of the Ebola pandemic there. And you told me -- I still remember talking to you on the phone. You told me a story about Ellen Johnson Sirleaf that I found hugely striking. You said it was September 2014. You hadn't gone to Liberia yet, but Liberia

was in the middle of the Ebola epidemic. People were literally dying on the streets and Madam called you up.

At the time you were the chairman of the African Affairs Subcommittee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Do the two of you remember that phone call?

SENATOR COONS: I certainly do. And Madam President, I will leave it to you to also comment, but I was not the only American that she was reaching out to. But it was an honor to have some very small role to play in helping persuade President Obama and his administration to make a bold step and to very actively respond. That conversation may have been earlier in the year than September. My trip to Monrovia and upcountry to Tapeta, if I remember correctly, was actually in December. It was that late that we could get the Senate position to give me position to travel.

But more than anything, Madam President was a remarkable, powerful, engaged leader really fighting on behalf of her nation. And the people of Liberia showed incredible resiliency and heart and determination in coming through the Ebola pandemic. And the American people I know were grateful for the chance to support her efforts and to be partners in that very challenging journey through this tragic and difficult pandemic.

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: There is no way I could forget. I mean, absolutely. Even though I had talked to President Obama and he had said he would do something, I knew if I didn't have someone who was going to drive it, was going to take his positive response and turn it into action. And that's what Senator Coons could do. The fact that he has already mentioned the name of one of our rural cities because he came all the way here and he went, that's exceptional. He could have stayed right in the capital city and had some meetings and gone back. He went beyond that. And so we just remember him and the role he played and everything he has done since then to make sure that we all keep on track responding to these kinds of crisis.

MS. COOPER: What I found really interesting talking to Senator Coons about that phone call, one of the things I thought was really interesting if he said the two of you when you talked on the phone before you came, the two of you didn't really know each other that well at that point, but you ended up praying together on the phone. And I found that to be really striking. Do you remember that?

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: I do.

SENATOR COONS: I --

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: This was so exceptional. And then normally the person would end up praying, but it did call -- the circumstances called for prayers. And I'm glad that Senator Coons was also a praying person. So it was easy for us to do that.

SENATOR COONS: And I will just add something if I could, Helene. We had actually met several times before that. I had the blessing of traveling to Madam President's second inauguration with Secretary Clinton. It was a truly memorable event. And there were some very pressing security concerns. There were some very disaffected opponents of the presidents who were wrestling with whether to recognize her election or not right up until the day. I got the chance to see two really powerful I'm a capable, grounded leaders in Secretary Clinton and President Sirleaf.

I was a very new senator at this point. I'd only been a senator for maybe a year. And to sit in the back and to listen and watch as they were navigating this very fraught and challenging moment was a tremendous experience for me. And Madam President had come and visited me in Washington. I actually have a framed picture of it right here in my office. She is the only head of state with whom I've taken a framed picture and there is one of my office in Delaware and one in my office in Washington, because I was so taken with her dignity, her seriousness of purpose, her determination.

And in that first meeting she raised the issue of the Mount Coffee dam and whether or not the United States would make good on a decades long partnership that had begun back in the '60s with its original construction. The head works and the transmission lines had been destroyed in the civil war. And as I remember it, Madam President was saying this would make a critical difference in making accessible electricity and power not just for the immediate region, but the whole region, a three country region.

And the Millennium Challenge Corporation played a critical role in getting the Mount Coffee dam rehabilitated and open again, but that has taken almost 10 years. And that conversation with Madam President, the conversation about her interest in working with the United States and the importance of our re-engaging and being real partners, led me to help create the Development Finance

Corporation, which is a new tool and a new resource that is going to help with development finance around the world because it really bothered me.

It really haunted me that we didn't have a good answer. She asked for a perfectly reasonable request for some assistance with development and then I went to the Obama administration and was basically told we don't really do things like that at that scale anymore. The United States has moved on. We do other things.

So I have had several conversations with Madam President that left significant impressions on me. What was so striking about that conversation during Ebola was that as a proud and accomplished and respected leader, I could hear in her voice when she called just that sense of desperation over urgency, just how out-of-control the pandemic was getting and just how urgent this was. And so that's what moved us to pray together was this sense that this great nation and this proud and accomplished leader genuinely felt overwhelmed by the arc of it, by just how rapidly it was getting out of control and how many Liberians might well die if we didn't act and act decisively and act promptly. I will always be grateful for the opportunity she gave me to play some small role in helping.

MS. COOPER: Well, that is the perfect segue been to what I wanted to ask you. Just one more question before we get to youth and democracy. Is just looking --

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: But let me just say, Senator, I left the dam in full operation and it's working today with support from the Millennium Challenge Account. I think you ought to know that, please.

SENATOR COONS: Isn't that amazing? And I did know -- if I neglected to mention that I apologize. That was the positive outcome was that by the end of your term it is now fully restored and functioning. And that is the exciting, positive outcome.

MS. COOPER: So I wanted to ask you then, looking at Ebola and looking at lessons we can learn on the coronavirus today, Madam you were head of this WHO panel that's been -- this panel has been looking at the WHO response to the coronavirus pandemic. One of the things that the panel you chair with came out in the interim report was to say that China -- Chinese authorities should have acted with much more urgency and much faster at the beginning of COVID.

What about other governments around the world? And this is for both of you because you both learned from the -- you experienced the Ebola outbreak and saw what can happen when a government does move with sufficient urgency as Liberia eventually did. How can you apply those lessons to how we've now across and around the world behave with COVID?

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: We know Helene and I co-chair with the former prime minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark, the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response. And what we are trying to do, on the instruction of the director general of the World Health Organization, is to come up with a report that focuses on what happened. How did it happen that the world was so unprepared for a pandemic that has actually penetrated every country in the world in such a serious way? What are the lessons? What can be done to ensure that the world is better prepared just in case there is another pandemic?

That's our assignment and we've done a lot to gather the information, the evidence, the data, to hold consultations, to open workshops, to get reports, to take the literature and the research that's been done and understand it and sift through it, get the evidence out of it. And we are now nearing the completion of the work that started several months ago. And in May we are going to make a report to the World Health assembly and we hope we're going to be very bold, very clear and independent in reporting of findings and the truths, and also making strong recommendations about what needs to happen with the international system that make sure that countries are prepared, and an international system that also recognizes the role that needs to be played through national and regional systems so that everyone has systems, health systems that are prepared to cope with any such virus or epidemic that may come again.

MS. COOPER: Thank you. If you want to leak the report early to a news organization, I'm here and willing to take it.

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: (Inaudible)

MS. COOPER: All right. Let's start with our topic or else Brookings is going to kill me if I just spend the whole time asking the two of you about COVID.

Senator Coons, I wanted to start with you because it seems as if -- I've covered for years

that for decades the United States goes around the world preaching to other countries about democracy. And all of a sudden we are not looking necessarily that great especially when you look at what happened on January 6th. So let's just start -- I want to start with you.

What message do the January 6 insurrection -- January 6 insurrection at the Capitol have for American efforts to promote democracy globally but also across sub-Saharan Africa?

MS. COOPER: Well Helene, January 6 was a tragic, a difficult, a challenging moment for American democracy. The U.S. Capitol, as our secular temple to democracy, is one of the best recognized symbols of democracy around the world. And as that assault was unfolding and as we in the Senate were fleeing the chamber to go to a secure place, my son who is a college student texted me and said Putin and Xi Jinping are having a very good day today.

What he meant implicitly was young people all over the world watching this and that they are concluding that the United States is not the sort of stable and safe and careful and dedicated and open democracy that we have long said that we are. And frankly a lot of the predicate for that or the groundwork for that was an entire year spent focusing on unaddressed challenges of racial inequality and the protests that unfolded nationwide in cities and towns large and small all over our country in response to the brutal killing of George Floyd and then many other instances of police violence and which Black and Brown men and women across our country were killed.

Let me just say this. First, that does demand of us that we tend healing our own democracy and that we attend to the hard work of each other and respecting each other and building the connective tissue of democracy that has frayed under the leadership of our last president and because of some deep divisions in our country, some of which go all the way back 400 years to before the founding of our formal nation as the United States with the founding sin of slavery and racism that has eaten at and been a piece of who America and Americans are since this nation started. That is what that I'm confident President Biden and VP Harris are going to lead.

But I also think it's important that on January 6, we returned to the House and Senate chambers after security forces that cleared out the protesters who had stormed the Capitol. We resumed the work of certifying the election. And Republicans and Democrats together in the Senate chambers

certified the election. President Trump and the mob that he incited were not successful in preventing the inauguration of President Biden. So although we had a very difficult, violent day of protests, it did not ultimately deter our democracy from moving forward. We had a successful transfer to President Biden.

Our unresolved challenges the tens of millions of Americans who do not believe this election was legitimate and the rising number of Americans who think violence is justified to achieve their political ends. As Madam President knows very, very well, healing the wounds of the Civil War are exceptionally difficult. The United States went to a horrific, divisive, and bloody Civil War from -- in 1861-1865. I have an ancestor who served in that conflict. If we think the divisions in our country do not continue to live with us, we are kidding ourselves.

And so as I have tried to be a proponent of democracy in visits to countries around the world, I have also tried to be transparent about the ways in which ours is not a perfect country. And one of the great things, one of the wonderful and challenging and inspiring things about the special relationship between the United States and Liberia and the robust communities of Liberians at that exist in America and Americans that exist Liberia, is that it is a part of that journey towards becoming a more perfect union by recognizing the unresolved and unaddressed inequalities in our nation that I think can still hold out promise for the future of democracy.

Youth activists in Liberia, in the United States, and around the world are demanding action of a more seasoned generation of political leaders. Not just on racial inequality, but on climate change, opportunity and equity, on education, on public health. And I do think that the United States is continuing to make progress on those. But the incident of January 6, which in some ways culminated a year of conflict and tension in our country, has to be addressed that we have to renew our democracy if we are going to have any standing to promote and preach about democracy through the rest of the world.

MS. COOPER: Madam, do you think January 6 can be a teachable moment for -- about democracy for African youths? What do you -- how do you explain it to young people in Liberia?

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: I think there is a lot of surprise that something like that could happen in the United States, the anchor of world democracy. And I think a lot of people are saddened by this. And the fact that it could have, had it not been repulsed and actions that are now going could have

had major effect on the democracy that we have taken so long and thought so hard to build. But I'm so glad that there is not a reset and we can see that the (inaudible) is now back.

MS. COOPER: Do you think -- for both of you, but I would like to start with Madam. Do you think you can make a reasonable argument to skeptics now about democracy that, as horrible as what happened January 6 was here in the United States, the institutions actually held? And you can use that when you're talking about institution building across Africa?

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: I think the one lesson that I take from it is that at the end of the day well developed institutions make the difference. No matter how persons or groups may try to put things off track, strong institutions will ensure that there is a counter action and that things will go back on track. So I think that's exactly what has happened in the United States.

MS. COOPER: Senator Coons, do you have any thoughts about the whole argument that you can make about American institutions actually holding? And beyond that, is it time for maybe a little bit of humility from American politicians when we are preaching to other countries about democracy now?

SENATOR COONS: Yes. As I sifted through the texts and emails and messages I received from around the world the day of January 6 and the days after, there were a number that were particular pointed, and in one or two cases, pointed at me.

MS. COOPER: What was the worst one?

SENATOR COONS: I'm not going to say it was the worst one, but it -- you know, some of the leadership of Zimbabwe, a country I have visited. We continued to have sanctions against the government and against individuals. And we are trying to support and encourage a transition towards a robust democracy and accountability for actions that happened under the Mugabe government. There was a very pointed public message about, who the heck are you to lecture us about our democracy. That sort of -- that stuck.

And I will tell you that folks in international settings like the United Nations, the Chinese and Russians have long said, "Who are you to criticize our human rights record when you have challenges with your criminal justice system and racial inequality?" But I don't think that we should be

silent about the human rights violations in Shandong or the crushing of democracy in Hong Kong because we have significant unresolved challenges in our criminal justice system and racial inequality.

I remain more passionate than ever about a system where journalists hold elected officials accountable, where an independent judiciary defends and advances the Constitution even in the face of a powerful executive who insists that he ought to be able to do whatever it is that he wants and where a legislature is a counterbalance to the executive and where together they try to come up with a consensus about how to best meet the needs of the people. I do think humility is called for given how challenged our nation has been in this past year to hear each other and respect each other and move forward.

But in terms of believing that democracy is a better system than authoritarianism, I think the incidence of the last year and the ways in which human rights are being violated in Russia, and China, and dozens of other countries makes me frankly more passionate about the importance of a system of constitutional democratic governance where journalists play a key role, where courts play a key role, and where elections and the steady and peaceful transition of power allow the people to be heard. I'm more passionate about that than I have ever been.

MS. COOPER: Thank you. For Madam, I want -- you famously invented your own word back when you were a young woman starting in the Liberian government when you came up with the word kleptocracy, which I actually literally think she totally made up, by the way, and accused the government of being filled with kleptocrats who are basically taking on the public -- taking on the public bill.

How do you respond to the young person who believes in democracy process over and over, we don't see how democratic government works for us or serves us, and who thinks that the government is only a place to go and get money and that they need to wait their turn to benefit from the system? The whole our time to eat mentality?

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: You know, the majority of young people who are in public service are really good people. I mean, they do want to forge ahead. They do want to get into higher positions. Yes, they want to assure that they make enough income to be able to meet their comforts and

desires. But the majority, I find -- yes, there are those who want to make a quick buck. You will always find people like that. And those people we'll have to find a way to deal with them either through dialogue with them, dude discussion and civic education, and if necessary through punishment or penalties if it comes to that, if it's a legal obstruction.

But I still think -- and I look at the emerging public leaders network that I'm a part of, and I look at what happened the year before that; with those who started what I call the president's Young Professionals Programme and brought young people together to work together. Those who were abroad who were recruited and repatriated, to come and serve their country, to have them paired with those from local universities and have them go through a meritorious selection and recruitment process and the kinds of camaraderie that they formed working in our civil service.

If we did not have those young people that really were the anchor in trying to bring efficiency to public service at a time when most people in our public service with those who came from the war, young people who do not have an education, child soldiers who didn't have the knowledge. These were the ones that enable us to make the progress that we made.

And I daresay throughout -- today of course the pool of young people technically who are prepared to work in public service are much larger than governments have the capacity to be able to absorb them. And I think that's where our real challenge will lie. How do we ensure that we can meet their expectations? How can we make sure that the knowledge that they bring through some of the years of prioritizing education that we can get them the right kind of employment, the one that they can see as providing them the impetus and the chance where --

MS. COOPER: I think you are freezing. I think Madam President is freezing up a little bit with the connection in Monrovia.

So Senator Coons, let me ask you, while we hopefully get her connection unfrozen, just a quick question on this Biden administration Summit for Democracy that the president has talked about. What is actually -- A, do you think that's even a good idea right now given what has happened in America on democracy? But B, if so, give me sort of the pitch for this.

And then he was going to be invited? But I'm less interested in who you are actually

going to invite then how we are actually going to -- because this gets back to this whole humility thing again. Are we in any position to be holding the settlement on democracy?

SENATOR COONS: So Helene, first if not us, who? So there are lots of other democracies around the world who can and should talk about their democracies, their challenges, what transitions they've made. I will remind you Madam President won the Mo Ibrahim Prize for serving her two full terms under the constitution and then retiring. President Issoufou of Niger was just awarded the Mo Ibrahim Prize.

The United States has managed to have an orderly presidential transition without changing the Constitution, without election related violence, without profound disorder from most of our history. But January 6 was a reminder that these moments of transition are very challenging, they are very fraught and the huge amount of power that is passing from one group to another at a presidential inauguration.

And so to your core question, first I do think this is a good time for the democracies of the world to gather and to reflect about the ways in which democracy globally is on its back foot. Freedom House has said this is the 15th year in a row where authoritarianism is rising and where a number of our democratic partners and allies have used COVID to shrink civic space, to repress minority parties or journalists, or to make it harder for people to petition their government or to participate in protests.

And we've seen coups in several different countries around the world from Mali to Burma. And the general trend is against democracy right now. And so what better time for us to approach the topic with a spirit of humility to confront what we have to do. So my suggestion is, before we host a conference, let's have some serious conversations here about how do we reinvest in and rejuvenate our democracy.

I am moving bipartisan bills that are related to civics education in the United States and national service opportunities in the United States. We have five times as many young people seeking to serve our country through programs like AmeriCorps and Vista and Peace Corps than we find. And so I'm saying we should give young people more opportunities to gain skills, to gain a chance to go to college, to give back to their communities through distributed, nonprofit service opportunities in our

country. I think if we do things like that and if we approach this conference with that spirit of we are going to learn from each other about how difficult democracy is, how fragile it is, then I think it's a good thing. I think it's well worth investing in.

One lesson a point if I might Helene, I did a lot of things in my several day trip to Liberia in December of 2014. But there's two things that really stick with me that are related to this topic you and Madam President were discussing about youth leadership and the younger generation. One is I met with the YALI Fellows, the Young African Leadership Initiative Fellows at the U.S. Embassy. This was a dozen young Liberians all very promising, very capable young people, many of whom had been in college in the United States, but all of whom had been at college or university somewhere on the continent or in Europe or the United States.

And they had left those opportunities and focused on launching grassroots, public health responses to the pandemic. And the things that they were doing, the initiative they were taking as we went around this table on the rooftop of the U.S. Embassy and they were describing, I'm working on this, I'm working on this, on safe burial or on clean water or on contact tracing. It just was so inspiring to meet these incredible young Liberians taking responsibility, taking the initiative, leading the response.

And also one morning got to go to what was the daily sort of crisis update. And as I was driving over to it, I'm looking at the list of all the groups that are going to be in the room, like 5 different U.N. agencies, 14 different ministries, and 10 different NGOs, and 4 different U.S. government entities. And I thought this is going to be a complete mess. I mean, you know, no agenda, everybody yelling at everybody. I've been to crisis situations around the world where getting everyone on the same page and coordinating and communicating is a real challenge, particularly when you've got so many different entities from so many different -- it was amazing.

It began on time. It had a clear agenda. There was a decisive moderator and they went through all the different groups and everybody had a specific thing that they were responsible for and they stepped forward and they took responsibility for. And then after an hour that group broke and went upstairs and that was all room with tables that had signs on them, contact tracing, safe burial practices, clean water, testing and laboratory facilities. And sitting around these tables at folks from ministries of the

Liberian government, U.N. agencies, different NGOs, and they were collaborating and communicating. I thought, I wish that the world could see this.

Leadership matters. Madam President's leadership, how she delegated a lot of this responsibility to very capable and inspiring young Liberians. This was not Americans running this meeting. It was Liberians running this meeting. And I came away thinking this is a tragic and challenging pandemic and a very difficult moment for this nation, but when you've got such promise in young people who are dedicated to getting back into -- and to leading in the future is going to be better.

And in responding to natural disasters and crises here in the United States and in Liberia and in other countries, I see that. I see a younger generation that is excited and is eager to take their turn and is ready to step forward and to help lead and serve. And I think when you've got leadership that is willing to create opportunities and settings for that, there is no limit to how much we can do.

MS. COOPER: Well, the leadership part is clearly important. And that that's sort of -- we are opening it up. We are opening it up now to questions from the audience and I'm trying to sift through some of them.

But particularly for Madam President, one of the questions we got from the audience is about young people and their ability to peacefully protest both during a time of a pandemic, but also when you look at so many other countries including the United States, but you see Nigeria and you see other places in Africa that tended to look at youth protests and brand these kids who are protesting as enemies of the state.

Madam President, how do young people protest without getting -- ending up getting branded as such? One of the great things that you did in Liberia was to open up sort of the public discord. When you were president of Liberia, it was fine to protest. People could protest without getting thrown into jail and without getting attacked by the police. That was one of -- the debate in Liberia was so lively and that there was political discourse and people could have opposing opinions.

That is often not the case. We saw flashes of that not being the case here in United States last summer during the Black Lives Matter protests. And we've seen that in Nigeria. Madam, what you said young people about the whole idea of being able to allow their voices to be heard without ending

up risking going to jail? What do you say to your other African -- to African leaders about where they are on this?

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: Peaceful protest is a fundamental principle of democracy. There is no question about that. But peaceful protests must move to another -- it must move from protest to dialogue. That's the only way you find solutions. And I think leaders must also take the responsibility. In the midst of a protest, one must be able to engage the young people and get them to dialogue on what the issues of protest are all about. What are some of their grievances? What are some of their solutions?

I think I had the occasion to just get out of a vehicle and just jump in the middle of a group of protesting university students that were attempting to riot. And I got out and just jumped into it with them and said, "Now very well, if we're going to protest, I'm going to protest with you unless you are willing to come over to the office and let's sit around the table and talk." And that broke the protest up by a protest turning to dialogue. And that live dialogue enabled us to understand what some of their issues were and to try to respond to it.

So I think it's that, but I think also, young people must find a way to create conditions for dialogue, to engage leaders on different aspects of the society, not just what they err or not just in a very contentious, critical way. As important as criticism is part of democracy and leaders must be willing to take that criticism when it comes but take that criticism and then turning into an opportunity to engage on both sides. Leaders must engage the young people and young people must also provide the opportunities for that engagement and welcome it and identify the issues they want to discuss.

So they can be -- there are so many ways that they can find collaborative action among their groups in a society to identify the areas for which there are grievances or areas in which they have solutions and ideas that they can send to leaders. So they made the way to open up the channels of communication. And that's what I think we all ought to focus on.

But there will be protests and there must be when the time calls for it. But there must be a way to move it so that it doesn't become violent.

MS. COOPER: It's interesting. I remember you doing that. I've been with you many,

many times when you did that. But I also remember you doing that when you got out of the car in West Point during the Ebola pandemic and that's when things got really -- things got very hairy. But I remember you going -- there was a lot of give-and-take at that point.

We have so many questions coming in from the audience. And they are -- some of them are pretty -- are really interesting. Let me read another one. Here I'm just going to read out the question. I think this is more toward Madam President, but I think actually both of you should take this.

Why do we allow former leaders to launder their images on youth and democracy after they leave office when they should have gotten it right while they were in office to begin with? It feels like lip service to me as I have seen such happen in Nigeria so many times. Madam President?

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: Maybe the leaders when they leave office get bored. They are just looking for attention. No, I don't think that happens most of the time. I mean, there may be some leaders that would try to, once they leave, is to now talk about all the nice things that youth represent and all that.

MS. COOPER: Yeah, while they didn't do any of it while they were president.

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: Yeah, and many do so when they are president too. And if they don't, I think we must find a way to call them to action. Youth must find a way to be able to, again, to call upon them and to engage them and to say, just look at what we are doing. Pay attention to us. And it does happen.

And if that's when past leaders -- you know, those who have left office ought not to leave their presence and contribution to the country. And so maybe if the they err by trying to say nice things about young people, then young people should challenge them. Even though they are no longer present, they may not have no power to make changes in the provinces as such, but they have -- they still have the responsibility to engage, the responsibility to contribute, the responsibility to be a part of what the nation is going through. And so we must all encourage that I think.

MS. COOPER: Well, on that note then, let me direct this one to Senator Coons. This is the perfect question for you. How can development partners help African countries whose leaders don't want to leave power and who are willing to use their armies against their citizens just to remain in power?

SENATOR COONS: So I've had a number of difficult and challenging conversations with heads of state who were intent on staying, on changing the Constitution, and breaking their promises to run again. One of the challenges is to apply appropriate pressure to say you need to keep your promises to your people, you need to allow for a new generation of leaders, but to not act as we are the United States and we get to tell you in your country what to do. I mean, that's a --

MS. COOPER: It's a fine line, yeah.

SENATOR COONS: -- balancing act because we have to be appropriately humble about the outcomes and the processes in other countries.

But where a head of state has publicly said, "I intend to leave, I'm not going to challenge the Constitution, I'm not going to extend my term, I think the democracy in our nation demands it, and then they change their mind and pursue reelection anyway." Or where they, to the point of the question, misuse the security forces of their country to influence the outcome of the election I think we have an obligation to press, and to press hard and to provide support for those who are contesting the election, to provide security and encouragement and support for democracy.

Through the United States, through USAID and through our State Department we provide funding for democracy and governance in countries all over the world which mostly consists of supporting nonprofits that advocate for journalists, or advocate for human rights advocates, or for minority parties to help them stand up elections and to challenge elections if they are not free and fair. And that is deeply resented by some of the more authoritarian rulers all over the world, not just on the continent of Africa. There is a number of countries where we have very, very heated and very testy relations because someone who has been president for 40, 50, 60 years is tired of the United States calling them out and demanding free, fair, and open elections.

But I think if we are going to have any credibility as a country that supports democracy, we need to continue to press for those who refuse to step down and those who just lately still elections to be held to account and to either cut them off in terms of assistance, or as we do in many countries, only provide assistance directly to the people, not to the government.

So for example in Zimbabwe, we have provided humanitarian food relief during terrible

droughts when otherwise many of the people in Zimbabwe would be very hungry or die from hunger. Even as we have this ongoing tension and contest with Mugabe and now Mnangagwa, we have continued to provide financial support for food relief that is appropriate because the people shouldn't suffer just because their leadership is out of -- is operating in a way that doesn't fully respect their constitution.

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: You know Helene, I'm glad that Senator Coons said that because I think there is a perception sometimes that there is double standards and that some can get away with it without too much of a dialogue because they are resource endowed and the fact that what happened in the United States in the last four years may also have served to undermine the emphasis on democracy and the commitment to democracy. So I think we now have to again research and try to re-fix the standards to make sure that international standards apply everywhere by everyone.

MS. COOPER: It such a tough -- you know, it's such a tough thing especially now when you -- I mean, both striking that balance and when you look at what happened in the United States and the idea that we are not in a position to be telling anybody anything.

We're starting to run out of time. I think we have like two minutes left. I want to ask this question of both of you and ask you to keep your answers short. But I think this is a question -- the question as it came in, is how can young people move beyond social media advocacy to reach out to political leaders. But the way I would like you both to answer it, because you are president and you were senator, Senator Coons and Madam President, what -- if you are a young political person, somebody that's an advocate and you are somebody in Liberia or anywhere in the United States, what was the best way for this -- for young people to get to you, to get your ear when you were president Madam President? Or for you now Senator Coons? What's the -- is it the holler in the streets until you make enough noise until you come down and engage with them? Or is it what? To write letters? What? Tweet? I will start with you, Madam President

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: I think generally those who really send a letter, that's outstanding, that states what the issue is and they want a dialogue and they want a dialogue with a group of them to be able to discuss it. I don't think -- I would not, and I don't think most presidents would not

respond to that.

I think where a negative response comes is when you -- when someone takes to the airwaves and you degrade your country and you -- then I think it brings resistance on the part of leaders that says if you're going to be critical, be positive. And even if you have to be harsh in your criticism, make sure you stand by your country, make sure you show that you believe your country is the one that you are prepared to work for, you're prepared to be the activist for change.

And I think most leaders will respond to that. And they will respond if young people do reach out to them in a positive way and ask for dialogue on certain issues. There are one or two that may not. There will always be somebody who feels that the power is in their hands and they don't have to listen anybody, they don't have to pay attention to one people. But I think those of the few.

I think the majority of leaders will listen because if they don't listen, they know that they will pay the price for that because our countries are young and the young people are demanding and we are going to have to respond to those demands if we want to make sure that we keep our countries safe and that we keep our development processes on course.

MS. COOPER: Thank you. It is 2:00. Senator Coons, what's a quick way for your best advice for young person who wants to reach out, a young political aspirant who wants to reach out to you?

SENATOR COONS: Show a promising solution. So for those who actually get engaged and get -- roll up their sleeves and get hands-on and address a problem in their community or neighborhood and then can come forward and say, I know we have a problem with getting safe, clean drinking water, getting affordable housing, getting reentry programs for those who have come out of prison, getting a skills program going, here is an idea. Here's a demonstration. Here is a model.

We know that we have more problems to solve than we have answers for. And one of the great blessings of youth is the energy and the vitality and the vision to say we are not going to do it the way it's always been done, we might have a new solution. Those who have come forward and say I know you're trying your best, but honestly, patriotism consists of believing in and loving your country enough to criticize its shortcomings and then offer constructive solutions.

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: Absolutely.

SENATOR COONS: And when a young person comes forward with an idea and says you may not have tried this, but here's how we can solve this problem, that's exciting. That's engaging. And that (inaudible) start my day and say I want to go visit this place where they are doing something great with children or childcare, with healthcare or outreach.

And the last thing, Madam President has always kept an open and a youthful heart. That willingness to wade into the crowd and say, let's be in dialogue. If you're going to be a leader and stay a leader, you have to say openhearted about your willingness to hear ideas and to hear criticism.

It has been such a blessing to be on with you, Madam President I really appreciate everything you have done and everything you are doing. And Helene, thank you so much for moderating today.

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: Senator, I'm still waiting for the invitation to Wilmington.

SENATOR COONS: You are invited.

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: Okay. We will set a time.

SENATOR COONS: Please.

PRESIDENT SIRLEAF: Thank you, so much.

MS. COOPER: Thank you, both of you. This was fun.

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