

**“Building a New Partnership with the Media: A Conversation with PUL”**

**Keynote Address by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**

**At Induction of Officers of the Press Union of Liberia**

**YMCA Building, Broad Street, Monrovia**

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**Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press Union of Liberia:**

I find it befitting to start this intervention by paying tribute to Mr. Stanton Peabody, whose personal struggles and boldness led to the creation of the Press Union of Liberia, in 1964. Much has happened since those days. Today, in Liberia, nobody would be arrested for calling members of any branch of the government “names.” The freedom of expression we enjoy today as a nation is partly a result of the immense sacrifices and unrelenting struggles of members of the press. Those achievements are indeed proof that the “pen is mightier than the sword.”

Mr. Peabody has survived many who have tried to silence him over the years. He lost several colleagues, who were either forced into exile, and others, like Charles Gbenyon, who paid the ultimate price. In the past decades, many of you have come face to face with the challenge of saying things as they are, standing on the side of the truth and the people.

Those challenging moments in the life of a press person are determining as to where you would go. You can use your pen for the general good, or opt for your own survival. In politics as in the media,

we are all faced with the same difficult choices every day. How we proceed determines our place in history. And among you, today, there are many uncompromising men and women of the pen whom I would like to salute on this occasion. I would like to salute them on behalf of us, Liberians, who have counted on their honesty, truthfulness and commitment to the ideals of free speech and freedom of the press for the greater good.

Since its inception in the early 1960s, the Press Union of Liberia has been at the vanguard of the struggle for the freedom of expression, the primary layer of the foundation of a free and democratic society. Cognizant of the sacrificial role played by the men and women of this august institution, I want to assure you that this Administration will never take any measure nor will it be associated with any measure that would scale back the gains made towards the total freedom of the press. Without a free press, we cannot speak of a free society, because the press is the mirror and the voice of society.

We are here today to honor your new President, Mr. Peter Quaqua, the man you have elected for a second term. We want to congratulate him and his team for a job well done. We also want to congratulate each and every one of you who has worked tirelessly and under difficult conditions to make the Press Union what it is today: a vibrant institution. We live in a very volatile society, where rumors, character assassination and their other associated ills are common. To survive those hurdles and get re-elected by one's peers can be considered a mark of tenacity, hard work and the capacity to build consensus. These are all true mark of leadership. Therefore, Mr. Quaqua, I want to congratulate you for your stewardship of the PUL and we extend a hand of cooperation and partnership to you and your institution.

Your struggle is our struggle; we are bound together by the communality of our fight for justice, equality, and a free and fair society.

Let me say again: "The Pen Is Mightier than the Sword."

This is not the first time you hear these words. But I want to use them to describe our historical and political context. For two decades, this nation has been subjected to the scourge of men with weapons of every caliber to run our destiny as they wished. For a short while in our long national journey towards democracy and open society, guns became the ultimate tools for the control of power. But that control by the sword was for short a time and we have now made great strides. We are now on our way to achieve a pluralistic society, under the rule of the law, with freedom for all. This is what the likes of Charles Gbenyon, Rufus Darpoh, Lamini Warritay, Klon Hinneh, Allen Williams, Kenneth Best Stanton Peabody today represent, and many others have been advocating. Because no one cared to listen to them, because nobody took them seriously, we had that terrible two decades of mayhem and destruction.

The advocacy carried out by the founding members of the PUL still stands as one of the most important aspects of the fight for freedom, justice and free expression in this nation. The sword – or the guns – may have triumphed for short laps – but in the end the pen survived because its work and intents are driven by wisdom and the belief in the peaceful resolution of human issues.

Now that we have found freedom of speech, what do we do with it?

If the pen is mightier than the sword – or the gun – there is no doubt that those who use the pen must learn to use it with great care. I am not going to lecture you about the "responsibility of the press" as that has been done before. In most cases, those words were used mostly to patronize the media, and to try to direct its work and cow it into

submission. We believe that the primary responsibility of the press is to inform and educate the public and serve as a conduit for public sentiments. If there were any other responsibilities, they would be to work hard to strengthen your institution, which you must never forget are also business ventures.

Those who fought for political plurality in the larger society also worked to achieve the rule of the pen, which can also be defined as the rule of law. Those who stood against the many forms of injustice and tyranny in our society did so because they also wanted a society where contradictory ideas in their diversity will serve to build consensual society where people are respected for the depth of their thoughts rather than feared because of the size of their weapons.

Because of this communality of purpose, it is incumbent on us to work together to build that new nation that we have all been yearning for.

We are here to talk about partnership between government and the press. Yes, I am well aware that in the past, when leaders stood here and spoke of partnership between the media and the government, what they usually meant was that the press should be subjected to the whims of a particular political group.

That is not what we are seeking. It is actually what we all fought against. That type of conspiracy between government and the press is what leads to autocracy and it is the absolute opposite of the kind of partnership we are here to talk about.

It is our firm belief that the media has the same good intention that everyone has towards the achievement of our development goals.

Our role, as a government, is to create the environment where freedom of expression flourishes, where people have no fear of

expressing their ideas, and a society where nobody goes to jail or is punished for speaking the truth. Our role is to ensure that those fundamentals serve as the foundation upon which our society is built as we carry out the various development projects and social transformation.

As we strive to run an administration, the most important partner we have is the press. It is through the press that we know if what we are doing is right or does not serve the people well. It is through the press that we know what the people think and what they expect from their government. We can only build a strong government that takes care of the needs of the people if we have a clear appreciation of those needs and if we are told that policies we implement make sense or don't. Only the press is capable of playing that role of conveyor of responses. Only the press can convey the balanced reporting that enhances the confidence of investors and partners to promote the development that benefit all.

The partnership I am referring to can flourish between two independent institutions. The independence of the media is one of the cardinal aspects of its freedom. If the press were to be dependent on the government for handouts to survive, it could not fulfill that role of guide and whistleblower.

As we strengthen our institutions of governance, we look forward to the press growing stronger and more independent. Economic strength is a vital aspect of the growth of the media just as it is for the state. If you are only able to go to press sporadically, depending on the numbers of advertisements, or if a station can only go on the air whenever it can afford fuel for the generator, the impact of your work will be minimal. Of course, competition breeds quality work, but sometimes, when you look at the headlines, you see the same stories on and on. That is when we wish sometimes that we had stronger media institutions capable of carrying out the type of analytical

stories that can guide all of us. But that will come in time, and we are sure that many of you are working to get together.

For the media to do the kind of work it is expected in the new socio-political environment we live in, it must have the means to produce quality work and carry out studies, investigations and research. Those of you who have lived in the West or other African countries can testify to what I am alluding to. For example, if you want to help government tackle an issue, you must have the means to study that issue, you must have the personnel to research the topic, you need good editors to put the stories together, and you must also have the resources to follow up.

This is why we all need to look at the media also from an economic perspective, see it as a business venture that needs to prosper and provide decent living wages for its practitioners. Media institutions must have the same access to credit and loans as any business. And, as any business, they must build their own credibility.

You all know that upon assuming the leadership of this nation in 2006, we declared "corruption" as enemy number one. We recognize that the press has been very helpful in exposing cases of malfeasance in the government. It has spoken up when there were cases that needed to be brought to the public attention. However, in many instances, the press fell short on two counts: one, it rarely carried out the kind of investigative reporting that would allow the public to clearly understand what went on; and at times it failed to get the other side of the story, something that is crucial in fair reporting. I am sure those aspects will be corrected as the press becomes a stronger institution.

Speaking about corruption, we think the press would have also been helpful if it looked at how our administration kept the promise in removing that cancer from our public institutions. We came into

power after years of mismanagement and bad governance, with the corollary abuses of power. In our attempt to fight corruption, we were not going to revert to those instruments of abuse that almost destroyed our society. We sought to build institutional capacity to deal with the issues. First, we raised salaries so that people are less vulnerable to petty corruption. And second, we created institutions such the General Auditing Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the Public Procurement and Contracts Commission. We passed laws such the Freedom of Information Act and the Whistle Blower Act. We are now strengthening the judiciary to ensure that the prosecutorial branch of government is more capable. We think that any discussion of corruption must take those developments into account. We must also recognize and point to this societal problem which goes beyond government. Sometimes, it is important to shift paradigm in a debate to have a clear and total view of things.

Before I end, I would like to speak to an issue that has been in the media recently, and that is the \$100,000 which we received from friends who want to help the media and we passed it on to you. A lot has been written on it. I just want to say that our intention has never been to influence the media in its reporting. This was a friendly response from a friendly partner to a need expressed by the media. We hope that you will find a way to resolve that issue and that very soon we will all see that modern, state-of-the-art press house.

All of this is to say that we must look at the media from a different perspective than we usually do. It can and it must work in partnership with government, not as a dependent but as one the pillars of the democracy that we are attempting to build. One can say without hesitation that the press is one of the most important pillars of a free and democratic society.

PUL has great challenges before it. You must not only serve as watchdog for society, you must also regulate yourself. You must set your own guidelines, to become your own judges and serve as a mirror of the larger society. In doing so, you will help us who are in government, and that is the kind of partnership we seek, the unity of purpose, all efforts towards a common national goal, to strengthen our institutions so that together we can build that vibrant society and set the pace. The press will serve as the best reflection of the renaissance we have all been yearning for and which is just starting to point at the horizon. Together, we can make it. Having come so far, for all of us there is no turning back.

I thank you.