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Nobel Peace Prize Awarded to Three Activist Women

By **ALAN COWELL**, **LAURA KASINOF** and **ADAM NOSSITER**

LONDON — The Nobel Peace Prize for 2011 was awarded on Friday to three women from Africa and the Arab world in acknowledgment of their nonviolent role in promoting peace, democracy and gender equality. The winners were President [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#) of [Liberia — the first woman to be elected president in modern Africa](#) — her compatriot, the peace activist [Leymah Gbowee](#), and [Tawakkol Karman](#) of [Yemen](#), a pro-democracy campaigner.

They were the first women to win the prize since Wangari Maathai of Kenya, [who died last month](#), was named as the laureate in 2004.

Most of the recipients in the award's 110-year history have been men, and Friday's decision seemed designed to give impetus to the fight for women's rights around the world.

"We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society," said [the citation](#) read by Thorbjorn Jagland, a former Norwegian prime minister who heads the Oslo-based Nobel committee that chooses the winner of the \$1.5 million prize.

In a subsequent interview, he described the prize as "a very important signal to women all over the world."

Sitting inside her blue tent at the antigovernment sit-in where she has lived since late February, Ms. Karman, the Yemeni human rights activist, said "I didn't expect it," her eyes growing wide, a red flowered veil around her head. "It came as a total surprise."

Ms. Karman, 32, a mother of three, took to the streets of the capital along with about 50 other university students in January, demanding the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

“This is a victory for Arabs around the world,” she said of the prize, adding “and a victory for Arab women.”

In Liberia, Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf said that she and Ms. Gbowee accepted “this honor on behalf of the Liberian people, and the credit goes to them.”

“For we are now going into our ninth year of peace, and every Liberian has contributed to it,” she said. “We particularly give this credit to Liberian women, who have consistently led the struggle for peace, even under conditions of neglect.”

Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf is nearing the end of a heated re-election campaign, and as the world absorbed the news of her prize, her nation’s capital, Monrovia, was virtually shut down by a previously scheduled rally intended to energize the opposition before the vote on Tuesday.

Mr. Jagland said the election had not influenced the committee’s decision, calling the ballot there a “domestic consideration.” Analysts in Liberia have described the president’s re-election prospects as uncertain, though the Nobel announcement could change that. The Nobel committee’s decision underscored the gap between local perceptions of her — it is not hard to find critics of the president in Liberia — and the view from abroad.

Indeed, while Liberians widely acknowledge that peace and security have improved markedly during her tenure, Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf’s success in securing forgiveness for billions of dollars worth of Liberian debt and the change she has effected in the nation’s once brutal international image are often less appreciated in Monrovia than among outsiders. Unemployment is daunting, and the country is still mired in poverty.

But some residents took obvious pride in the decision. As the prize was announced, Bushuben Keita, a spokesman for Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf’s Unity Party, declared: “We are dancing. This is the thing that we have been saying: progress has been made in Liberia. We’ve come through 14 years of war, and we have come to sustained peace.

“This is proof that she has been doing well; there’s no cheating in this, this comes from other people. She’s doing very, very well. Her progress has been confirmed by the international community.”

In Yemen, Ms. Karman called the prize “the victory of our peaceful revolution. I am so happy, and I give this award to all of the youth and all of the women across the Arab world, in Egypt, in Tunisia.”

“We cannot build our country or any country in the world without peace,” she said.

In an [op-ed piece](#) published in The New York Times on June 18, Ms. Karman, whose first name in Arabic has been spelled as both Tawakkol and Tawakul, characterized President Saleh’s regime as a corrupt failure, and she urged the United States to quit supporting him even though he has portrayed himself as indispensable to the American effort to eliminate Al Qaeda operatives in Yemen. American officials have been pressing Mr. Saleh to relinquish power in a peaceful transition.

In Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, one of the world’s most powerful women, praised the award recipients. “The unflinching courage, strength and leadership of these women to build peace, advance reconciliation and defend the rights of fellow citizens in their own countries provide inspiration for women’s rights and human progress everywhere,” Mrs. Clinton said in a statement.

In Egypt, several activists who had been rumored to be in contention for the prize for their roles in the Egyptian revolution — the Google executive Wael Ghonim, the online organizer Esraa Abdel Fatah and the members of the April 6 Youth Movement — expressed pride that a young Arab had won the Nobel.

They declared that the true prize they sought was the fruition of the Egyptian revolution in the development of democracy in Egypt and the region. “We will work hard even if we didn’t get the [Nobel prize](#),” Waleed Rashed, a spokesman for the April 6 group, said in an Internet posting.

More than 250 people were nominated for the prize this year, and there had been speculation that the committee would reward bloggers or other activists from the Middle East who used social networking sites and other Internet platforms as they challenged entrenched dictatorships, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt.

But if the committee had singled out the Arab Spring, it could have courted criticism that, far from rewarding efforts toward peace, it had chosen a phenomenon whose final outcome in Egypt and Tunisia is far from clear, and which has provoked bloodletting and strife in Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.

Mr. Jagland said the 2011 prize recognized those “who were there long before the world’s media was there reporting.”

The announcement in the Norwegian capital followed intense speculation that the prize

would be awarded variously to a figure from the Arab Spring, the European Union or exclusively to Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf, 72, a Harvard-educated economist, who has often been cast as a pioneer in African politics.

In a recent interview with the Paris-based monthly magazine *The Africa Report*, Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf said she did not “want Africa to return to the men’s club” and forecast that women would take over in more African countries.

“It will definitely happen in other countries because many women are now vying for the presidency, which didn’t happen much in the past,” said Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf, who was inaugurated in January 2006.

She was broadly perceived as a reformer and peacemaker when she took office after several years in exile, during which she worked as a World Bank economist.

In Yemen, Ms. Karman has been widely known as a vocal opponent of the pro-American regime of Mr. Saleh since 2007, leading a human rights advocacy group called Women Journalists Without Chains. But it was only earlier this year — before the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt had gained momentum — that her readiness to take to the streets inspired thousands more in Yemen to do the same.

Her brief arrest by the authorities in January incensed many people and is credited by some analysts in Yemen with starting the widespread protests that have convulsed the impoverished land since. Some of her supporters have labeled her “the Mother of Revolution.”

Since then, however, she has become a contentious figure, criticized even by some in the anti-Saleh opposition, and her share in the prize could stir further debate among antigovernment activists.

Among women of Yemen’s Arab neighbors, however, the choice of Ms. Karman was cause for celebration, both for women and Islam. Nadia Mostafa, a professor of international relations at Cairo University, said the prize was endowed with “political significance.”

“Islam has always been associated with radical terrorism, intolerance and more,” she said. “Giving it to a woman and an Islamist? That means a sort of re-evaluation. It means Islam is not against peace, it’s not against women, and Islamists can be women activists, and they can fight for human rights, freedom and democracy.”

Ms. Gbowee, 39, was cited by the Nobel committee for uniting Christian and Muslim women against her country's warlords. As head of the Women for Peace movement, she was praised for mobilizing women "across ethnic and religious dividing lines to bring an end to the long war" that had raged for years in Liberia until its end in 2003 and for ensuring "women's participation in elections."

Her organization was founded in 2002 when Ms. Gbowee rallied women to sing and pray to protest fighting in a fish market.

"This whole process of three women receiving the Nobel Peace Prize is really overwhelming," Ms. Gbowee said in a telephone interview in New York, where she had just arrived on the last stop of an eight-city tour in the United States to promote "Mighty Be Our Powers," her new memoir describing her life in war-torn Liberia. "It's finally a recognition that we can't ignore the other half of the world's population. We cannot ignore their unique skills."

Asked whom she was going to vote for when she returned to Liberia for the election on Tuesday, Ms. Gbowee said: "President Johnson Sirleaf."

Vaiba Flomo, a women's right activists who has worked with Ms. Gbowee since 1998, said: "What motivated Leymah was the children she saw dying from starvation; women are getting raped, receiving multiple traumas. People shared with her, made her to come to know these things." Without such commitment, she said, "half the Liberian youth population will be amputated."

"It's good news for the Liberian people," said Emmanuel Ogbodu, a teacher, standing by the side of the road in the ramshackle seaside capital, referring to Mrs. Johnson Sirleaf. "It's a good way for peace in Liberia. Since she got in the chair, for me, we are experiencing peace. So I think she deserved it. Through her, peace came."

Immediate reaction in Monrovia was muted as the news was slow to spread. But some who had heard expressed satisfaction. "I appreciate her highly, very well," said Kona Ndoma, a civil servant.

"She has done very much for developmental purposes. So now, we go for the second term, please," said Mr. Ndoma. "She stabilized peace. There is no gunfire at all."

A woman selling fritters by the side of the road, Christiana Sami, said: "She deserves it, because she has developed the area. She's done some important things." A student, Grace

Kollie, 18, walking to school, said: “She increased the education system in Liberia. She also carried on good development in the country.”

Forecasts of the winner are rarely accurate. In 2009, the committee stunned Nobel watchers by awarding the prize to President Obama.

Last year’s winner was the Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo — a choice that infuriated the Chinese authorities and led them to take reprisals against Norway. Mr. Liu was not allowed to leave China to receive the prize and was represented on stage at the award ceremony in December by an empty chair.

In the past the prize has not infrequently been split among several recipients, including the 1994 prize shared by the [Palestinian](#) Yasser Arafat and the Israelis Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin; the 1978 award to Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel; and the 1973 prize to Henry A. Kissinger of the United States and Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam.

Alan Cowell reported from London, Laura Kasinof from Sana, Yemen, and Adam Nossiter from Monrovia, Liberia. Reporting was contributed by Heba Afify from Cairo, Anthony Shadid from Istanbul, Turkey, and Rick Gladstone from New York.