

African Women in Politics: Prospects and Challenges in the Coming Decade

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Abstract: *This paper looks at women's participation in politics in Africa. Increase in their participation in the power game was a function of the wind of democracy that blew across the continent and collapsed autocratic political settings that barred political activities. Despite the existence of equality of people in democratic systems, women are still facing challenges stemming from the volatile nature of politics, some traditional mores, and religious beliefs that barred them from contesting or occupying leadership positions in many countries in the black world. Progress has been made regarding the number of women holding political positions in Africa. However, more advocacy is needed to improve on the gains made so far. African women have a bigger role to play in moving away from the present situation to a stable and prosperous continent.*

Keywords: *Africa, Women, Politics, Democracy, Participation*

I. Introduction

Towards the last decade of the 20th century it became clear that the ideological war between the West and East had come to an end, with the West and capitalism under the leadership of the United States of America (USA) as victors. Events that indicated the end of the Cold War and the victory of capitalism over socialism were the collapse of the Eastern European iron curtains and the balkanization of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) into twelve autonomous Republics (Martin, 1990). The end of ideological war masterminded a global change in political and economic philosophies. At the political front a people's mandated government with term limits, periodic renewal of mandates, and observance of fundamental human rights became the universally acceptable political dress code. At the economic level free market economy where government has no business in business and only serving as a regulatory body or umpire became the order of the day and accepted dictum.

Long standing dictators in most African countries willy nilly sailed along with the tide because there are no other available options or escape routes. Bowing to the turbulent waves of the winds of change despite undisputable realism, that the process would either oust them from the saddle or scale down their powers and influences in the system. Confluences of domestic and external variables instigated African leaders' willingness to cave-in and behave in tandem with globally certifiable standards. First, most of the States in Africa heavily depend on credit facilities and other forms of aid from the victors and international evangelists of democracy and economic liberalism who now made democratic transitions a core conditionality of having access to the desperately needed facilities. Two, pressure from domestic civil rights and democracy activists who are constantly on the streets protesting against dictatorial policies that were emasculating rights and expansion of democratic space to accommodate oppositions and other voices of dissent.

Democratic transitions and multi-party politics introduced swept into the dustbin of history some reputable long standing dictators and sent to the political wilderness some political parties that have held power in their countries since self rule. In Zambia Dr. Kenneth Kaunda and his ZANU party that ruled the Southern African state was defeated by the opposition party of Frederick Chiluba. Dr. Heston Banda of Malawi met his Waterloo. In South Africa, Apartheid was dismantled and an all inclusive political process that permitted all citizens to participate by voting for their preferred candidates and party and aspire to any office of their choice came to force. Apart from numerous changes in many political climates across the continent, many embarked on transitions that legalised opposition parties and activism in the body polity, yet many dictators were forcefully overthrown by arms groups that felt sitting leaders are not serious in their quests to open up the political space or their warning that their time is up.

Transitions and democratic activities came with their unintended consequences like wars and pre and post elections violence, not because the democratic project was unpopular, but because of lack of understanding of its basic ethos and manipulative antics of sitting leaders to perpetuate themselves in power. Many countries were engulfed in horrendous civil wars that led to genocide because of the introduction of democracy which dislodged minority old power cliques in favour of majority rule. Minorities ousted because of the grand rule of one man one vote refused an attempt that reality therefore invented other means of subversion that triggered counter reactions that ended in monumental violence that distorted the assumed beauty and freedoms that came enshrined in a democratic setting. Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory

Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, fought wars with reasons bordering transitions and elections.

In the last two years a special phase in democratization of the continent unfolded which was globally code named Arab Springs. Arab Spring is a North African version of popular revolts of victims of protracted oppressive political system that ousted such regimes and paved way for genuine people's government through elections that were in tandem with internationally accepted standard. The revolution commenced with a young Engineering Graduate who couldn't pick a job in either the private or public sector in Tunisia decided to set up a roadside grocery table for a living, his business was destroyed by Tunisian security personnel on patrol; the young engineer went suicidal by setting himself ablaze. Bouzizi lost his life in the process, but his suicide adventure invariably became a match stick that sparked off a whirlwind of revolutionary flames in North Africa and parts of the Middle East. Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Muamar Gaddafi of Libya, and Ben Ali of Tunisia were dethroned. The same revolutionary fire instigated sweeping political reforms in the Kingdom of Morocco. Countries with "practicing democracy" like Algeria and Sudan were forced to increase their level of transparency in their democratic process, and enlarge the frontiers of freedom of citizenries.

II. The Role Of Women In Democratization Process

As the democratic wind blew vertically and horizontally across the black continent women were part of the evangelists of the new political and economic order in virtually all the states. Women were not spectators but active players in most of the pressure groups or political movements that campaigned for entrenchment of democratic rule and economic liberalism. In many climes they formed separate women groups with the sole purpose of mobilising women to the goal of opening up the political space in tandem with globally acceptable standards and enlarging the frontiers of rights as guaranteed by international, regional and sub-regional protocols. Women groups mounted a fierce campaign not only on rights of mankind but rights of women and how to protect and advance them in a world perceived to be that of men. Most of the groups adopted a multifaceted approach to issues of liberation and political participation through improving their economic potency via promotion of micro and macro loans, and capacity building and enhancement. This was done conscious of the fact that politics is capital intensive and a cash consuming python in the continent. It is a process where politicians are not only saddled with the onerous task of financing and sustaining political structures and programmes but wholesale and retail buying of votes and voters from criminals and enemies of a transparent process and open societies (Collier,)

Another level of women participation in sinking deep the democratic root is at pressure groups, political parties, and association levels. Most groups have women wings or some special arrangement that gives women a say or role in the process. A cursory survey shows that almost all political parties and movements have women wings headed by either women politicians or activists. This applied in societies where women are not permitted to lead because of cultural and religious norms. In the just concluded Arab Springs that swept away North African dictators who thought they can stand against the strong wind of change, women actively participated in streets protests, social networking, blogging, and talking in secret media outlet established for the purpose of the revolutions. Photos and video clips of protesters in streets in Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya shows women in the forefront, and even granting interviews to local and international pressmen covering the revolutions. These special arrangements that created separate wings for women soared the level of their participation and interest in democracy and governance.

The strategy of involving women by local or foreign democratic evangelists in the political process serves many purposes: 1) because of their numerical strength in all societies, their involvement automatically translates into votes that can give a political party victory at the polls; and 2) because no meaningful development can occur without the full participation of a group that constitutes over 50% of the entire population. For aforementioned reasons, every conscious effort was made to carry them along in all that is happening in the polity. Other pundits are also positing that because of the reliability of women in sticking to decision or loyalty to a cause, all political parties and political mandate seekers prefer making women part of their overall strategy or machinery. Though a male dominated endeavour but men vacillates consistently irrespective of their earlier alliance or commitments.

Judging from their commitment in all the states that transited or are still transiting from authoritarian political orders to democracy women have played and are still playing a crucial role in the struggle to hoisting a political system dictated by the will of the majority of the citizens of each state. There is no doubt that in all the struggles for open and transparent political orders in the black man's world, there is hardly a clime where women are seen leading the struggle like the way we see men leading through many organisations. However, their presence and crucial roles can't be denied because we saw how they formed associations that even men had to partner with to gain power or add strength and popularity to their movements. A clear example of this strategy can be seen in African National Congress, ZANU-PF and National Resistance Movement among others who reserved seats for women not for any interest other than attract women votes in their countries.

III. Reason For Increasing Participation Of Women In Politics

Many reasons have been advanced to justify their increased involvement in the democratic struggle and politics in all the countries in Africa. Reasons propounded emanated from variables that arose from domestic and international environment. By 1990s as stated in the first segment of this discourse the Cold War was permanently closed and democracy accepted as the only political order across the globe. Global intergovernmental organisations like United Nations and the body's affiliate agencies intensified their campaign of promoting democracy and increasing participation of women in the process. This added impetus to existing universal declarations on human rights, the international convention on civil and political rights, and convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. The United Nations also promoted programmes dedicated to uplifting the status of women in political affairs like the 4th Conference of Women held in Beijing in 1995 with the theme "Equality Development and peace Contriving Strategies"(Agbalajobi, 2009). More to this is insistence by most donor agencies that States willing to have access to their facilities must carry-out drastic political and economic reforms. This was tied to the notion that democracy promotes development and transparency while dictatorship retards development due to concomitant corruption and lack of checks and balances in the system. Alongside these reforms is promotion of and protection of rights universally accepted and ratified by most nations on earth. Since these countries are beggar states that depend heavily on aid, they cave-in and embarked on democratic voyages that permitted all and sundry to participate (Martin, 1990). Introduction of multipartism in the political systems engineered a boost in female's participation in politics and representation in political offices in the continent. Hitherto the political order in the continent consists of all sorts of arrangements like Monarchy, military regimes, and one party order. The basic features of all those settings are detrimental to full participation of citizens and in one party orders, people have no choice than to participate in official state recognised party. In such cases, they are run client and cultish fashion that discouraged many people especially women from full participation or representation. And in military settings, women hardly made it to the top or become members of the highest ruling councils. A study of all the military regimes in the continent shows that no single council had a female member. Countries like Nigeria whose political life was dominated by the military within a federal structure, could not make any woman a state Governor or Commanding officer of any brigade. With the introduction of multi party politics women formed their own parties or movements with special interest of promoting their interest in the polity (Tripp, 1990). And because of availability of choices political parties adopted policies that encouraged participation and representation like creating women wings, giving nomination forms free, and enforcement of quotas in their elective and appointive offices. Because of their commanding majority in all nations, political parties created a quota system in their elective and political appointment offices. Parties enshrined it in their constitutions that a certain percentage of their candidates for elections must be women. Ruling parties in countries like Uganda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe etc have an iron caste party policy that enforces quotas at all cost (Jacobson, 1994). In countries like Nigeria, Ghana and a host of others, most political parties reduced by 50% nomination fees for their female contestants. Still in other climes, nomination fees are free for intending female contestants to pick. In addition to these policies there are women groups campaigning for inclusion of their interest in the body polity and even financing female politicians in different parties. These policies increased participation and representation of women in all the countries parliaments or executive councils in the continents. Increase in participation and representation is rising even in countries with long standing religious and traditional norms that restricted their activities to home front. However, much has been achieved but more is desired because only Rwanda in the entire continent has more female parliamentarians than their male counterparts. Even with that, many doubted whether the genocide of 1994 and its unfortunate consequence was not responsible for nonchalant attitude of men to politics and in that case paving the way for women to dominate the space. People are still struggling to understand why Rwanda stood as the only parliament in the world dominated by women, despite lack of any constitutional proviso or electoral law that barred men from contesting in majority of the parliamentary seats.

A combination of these factors and many others increased participation and representation of women in politics. The campaign for deeper participation is on the increase and proliferation of local groups in league with their international partners rages on. And this is yielding positive results due to upsurge in the number of women contesting or holding public offices in the continent. The continent now has a woman head of state in Liberia, women head of parliaments in South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana, a female dominated parliament in Rwanda, and other numerous sensitive positions in many African countries.

IV. Factors Militating Against Participation And Representation

Narrations from the proceeding segments of this work show a remarkable upsurge in women participation and representation in the political terrains of all countries in the continent. One can even state without fear of contradiction that some countries did not only experience ordinary improvement but revolutions in terms of participation and representation. Judging from the time most states got self rule from their European

Colonial masters and the level of participation and representation in politics and political offices, there is no room to contest the fact that progress has been made. However, the transformation is not commensurate with their numerical strength and the quantum of their investment in the process. The improvement is far from set international target to achieve within a period of time and in all nations. Of course there is light at the end of the tunnel because of the gradual increase in participation and representation but there still exist factors slowing down the pace or completely militating against their full participation and representation in politics.

Despite the emergence of a global society and global culture instigated by globalisation, most States in Africa are still shackling under long nurtured traditional beliefs that apportioned separate roles to men and women in the society. And these roles were shared by men in tandem with what they think is right and accepted in their cultures. Consequently, women were assigned duties not far from home which added to their natural given duty of procreation and weaning of children for the family and the society at large. By this simple allocation of duties in the society women were tactically discouraged from participation in politics because it is an activity outside the home front and dominated by men. So, any attempt by women to participate in politics is seen as a deviant act not accepted in many societies across Africa. A few that ventured against societal norms were tagged names and in some cases chased out of their marriages by their husbands or family members. In worse scenario women who insist in participating in politics are openly called whores and women of easy virtues. This perception has negatively affected their level of participation and representation (Rosaldo and Louise, 1974). Lack of financial muscle to play the game of power is another factor militating against full participation and representation. Politics by nature is an expensive endeavour because it involved a lot of money consuming activities like rallies, setting up of campaign offices, writing of manifestoes and maintaining columns campaign officers (Marilee, 1995). Being an oppressed and exploited sex from adam, women are economically placed at a disadvantageous position compared to their male counterparts in politics and business. Because of this, women who decide to play politics are generally dwarfed because of their weak economic base. They often times work with smaller budgets or relay on grants specifically targeting women participant, which don't measure up to the growing financial demands of the political machinery on ground. Flow of funds coming from local and international groups usually come late and fell into the hands of corrupt male campaign directors who misappropriate them for personal purposes (Budlender, 1996).

Politics by nature is difficult and dirty; politicians do all things possible by hook or crook to get mandates. In extreme cases they employ Machiavellian principle of the end justifies the means. If subverting the electoral rules, deploying thuggery, wholesale and retail buying of votes, and stopping of votes in certain areas if that will make them win. These rough features of politics are too hot for women to handle and even participate in. These negativities associated with act of politicking convinced many women to accept the popular cliché that politics is dirty and for less honourable elements of the society. Their puritanical disposition propelled them to keep off political participation or representation in almost all the states (Nkoyo, 2002).

Africa is made up of two world renowned religions which originated from the Middle East viz Christianity and Islam. Alongside these two great religions are traditional African religion worshippers. A commanding majority beliefs are Christians and Moslems. These religions especially Islam have strict rules inimical to full participation of women in politics. Some sect don't accept women going out talk more participating in politics through contesting or accepting political appointments. Because of these religious injunctions women from Muslim dominated constituencies don't get necessary support from the people. It is too bad that fellow women don't even give their support to female candidates under the same factor of religion. Fellow women see them as recalcitrant elements rebelling against God, and if they lend their support they will attract wrath of God unto themselves in the world after (Ann and Njibo, 1992). It is only much better with Christians because there are no edicts from Jesus Christ or his apostles against given women leadership or participation in politics (1 Corinthians, 11:4-5). Still there are verses that placed a man as the head of the family and the church; some are literally exploiting that to the advantage of men by sprinkling their talks with such verses thus discouraging women from participation. More to this, there are orthodox churches that don't permit female pastors; this is also another signal of subordination of female to males. The two dominant religions out rightly or indirectly discourage participation and representation of women in politics.

All global indexes on education ranked Africa the least educated continent on earth. The statistic is so alarming that in some countries you have over 80% of its citizens illiterate without basic skill of reading or writing. A further survey shows that women are the most affected because of the same religious and customary value attached to women and importance of educating them. In most cases that involved a choice in families on how to invest in educating their children, the choice is normally clear; they go for the choice of educating a male child. The assumption is that, a girl child will end up in another man's house as a wife and member of her husband's family. They saw educating her as a lost investment that can't yield dividend at the end of the day. This discriminatory policy has added to the avalanche of disadvantages surrounding women in Africa. So by and large, out of a few educated ones in the society, only a negligible percentage goes to women. And since politics is played by the schooled not unschooled, that affected participation and representation of women in politics.

Though most constituencies are dominated by illiterates but when the time for choosing of leaders and representatives goes their way, they tend to bend towards those who went to schools or educated candidates. This is by no means saying that there are no exception to this pattern. In South Africa Jacob Zuma defeated Oxford trained Thabo Mbeki in an intra-party contest thereby forcing Mbeki to quit his office as president of the Republic in 2008. A similar scenario played in Nigeria in the First and Second Republic where less educated politicians of the north won all elections organised against much educated southern counterparts. There are other cases where very stack illiterates dictated the pace of politics in their immediate communities and countries. But such instances are too insignificant compared to the role played by educated elements in African political space.

V. Conclusion

Democratic wind has indeed crushed and flattened dictatorial political settings in Africa. By 2011 the last cluster of dictators were flushed out by the Arab Spring thereby completing the cleansing cycle in the continent. And this winds of change expanded democratic spaces in Africa and abetting participation and representation of women in politics. Election of Helen Salle as president of Liberia and renewal of her mandate after the expiration of her mandate, emergences of female speakers in South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana; and development like complete dominance of women in Rwandan parliament a few years after 1994 genocide cant escaped being referred to as a positive signthat the political theatre is getting better for women in the Blackman's world. Again, the rising in percentage in almost all climes in their presence in the parliament and executive council is commendable and another signal demanding improvement. However there are many rivers to cross if the global set target of parity in a few years to come is to be achieved. The continent is still struggling with civil wars and other trans-borders skirmishes that are threatening the successes recorded. Most of the structures are still in their formatives stages and too fragile to absolve the heat coming from politicians. For the continent to see full participation by women cultural and religious values must be amended or totally give way to take off the moral burden and stigma associated with women participation in politics. There must also be a deliberate effort to set up special projects that will improve their economic standing, which will give them financial potency should they decide to participate in politics. And finally the phenomenon of quotas which some countries are already practicing should be encouraged in all the countries. By and large, the future of African women in politics is bright and will get better in the coming decades because most of the factors holding back progress are gradually evaporating with the passage of time and changes within the global political system.

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