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# Engendering democratization in Kenya: A political perspective

Maria Nzomo

## Concept of democracy: Historical origin

The term 'democracy' was first conceived and popularized in ancient Greek city-states and was derived from two common Greek words: *demos*, meaning the 'people,' and *kratein*, meaning 'to rule'. Democracy as conceived in ancient Greece contained some of the ingredients of modern democratic ideals which include:

- maintenance of law and order
- promotion of justice for all
- maximization of freedom and equality for all citizens.

The institutional arrangements set up to ensure the survival of Greek democracy included:

- short office tenure for public officials
- direct participation of all adult citizens in the legislative process
- majority rule decision-making
- prohibition of re-election to certain key offices
- popular control of officials (including military ones)
- lot system of election for certain government positions.

While 'modern' democracies have borrowed extensively from the ancient Greek democratic conception, the Greek type of democracy was defective in certain crucial ways. It was, for example, strongly anti-feminist, since women, even wives of male citizens, had no political rights. Moreover, though it endowed citizens with political and legal equality, it did not extend the equality concept to other fields such as education, economics and social arenas. Further still, the children, resident foreigners and slaves were all excluded from Greek democratic rights. Worse still, the Greek democratic arrangement rested on the economic institution of human slavery. It was indeed the slaves and the other non-citizen groups (which included all women) who produced and reproduced all the city wealth, while the 'citizen class' (all men) only engaged in leisurely and political activities.

The version of democracy as practised in ancient Greece was, by any standards, primitive and oppressive to the majority of the people. But the justification given by the ancient Greek oligarchy for their type of 'democratic' arrangement was in some ways remarkably similar to the justifications used today to legitimize some oppressive political regimes that claim to be democratic. The ancient Greek rulers, operating within the context of a slave political economy, argued that the hierarchical division of labour and socio-political organization that existed was deemed to be just (and hence democratic), in as far as each person was seen to be performing the task(s) one was naturally fitted to do. Similarly, equality in this context was interpreted to mean equal within one's own class, gender, race and age group. Many 'modern democracies' though based on a capitalist rather than slave mode of production, display significant similarities with this ancient Greek democratic practice as shown in the next section.

## Modern democratic theory and practice

The concept of democracy has had, since the beginning, both an *ideal* as well as *practical* dimension.

Embedded in the ideal conception of democracy are the principles of freedom, equality and social justice. A democratic government, as conceived by the sixteenth President of the United States of America (USA), Abraham Lincoln, ideally should be a government *by* the people, *of* the people and *for* the people. The term *people* in this context is generally understood to include the majority of people in a society. The idea of 'ruling themselves' does not mean literally that everyone must directly be involved in the actual rulership but rather that they elect representatives

who they give the mandate to form a government to promote the interests of the governed. This democratic ideal therefore emphasizes the fact that a government should not be imposed or forced on the people but that the written or unwritten, explicit or implicit rules, procedures and regulations of government should be established and agreed upon by at least the majority (if not all) of the people.

A democratic political system then is one that encourages and makes possible the free and voluntary involvement of the people in the political life of the nation. In other words, important national decisions must result from a synthesis of the views of all the people. Democracy should therefore be a system of government in which individual interests, rights and freedoms are not only recognized and respected, but are also protected and upheld by the state and other institutions of governance. True democracy therefore should rest on popular participation in the political process, accountability of the rulers to the ruled and the sharing of power.

The practical dimension of democracy represents and consists of *how* to translate the democratic ideals into concrete reality. This dimension involves the technicalities or the ways and means of implementing a democratic programme, project or strategy. What are the best institutional arrangements or mechanism to ensure that in its mode of existence and in its concrete effects, the government remains or manifests the attributes of a 'good, fair and just' government? To achieve this, the structure of a democratic government should be based on a clear separation of powers of the judiciary, executive and legislative organs to ensure against tyranny and despotism, whereby one person could play accuser, judge and executioner all rolled into one. These institutions, in addition to political parties and the electoral process, should be used as a means of popular participation.

What however exist in the real 20th century world are, at best, only approximations of the ideals of democracy. Indeed, the term democracy has been variously interpreted and conveniently used to justify all manner of political actions, ideologies and regimes. For example, the French, American, Russian and Chinese revolutions were all executed and justified in the name of democracy. In 1917, President Wilson of the USA took his country into the First World War with the objective of making the world 'safe for democracy'. Many ideologies and viewpoints have found legitimacy in their identification with the term 'democracy'. Thus one hears for example of *social* democracy, *Christian* democracy, *liberal* democracy, *popular* democracy, ('the dictatorship of the proletariat' in Marxian political thought) and even *authoritarian* democracy, as popularized by the dictatorial military regime of General Pinochet of Chile.

For most of the last thirty years African states have had, in addition to military dictatorships, predominantly single-party regimes, that claim to

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being democratic. Some of the major arguments used to defend the one party 'democracies' of Africa include:

- the Africanness of single party systems
- the need to play down politics and to concentrate on nation building and economic development
- the view that multi-party systems of government are foreign to Africa.

Despite the many reasons advanced by African leaders for their preference for one-party systems of government, the manner in which many of them have conducted the business of government has been undemocratic, oppressive and unresponsive to the popular and legitimate demands of their people. The one-party political systems in Africa have tended to control and limit the rights and freedoms of the people who would want to voluntarily participate in the political and public life of their society. Institutions of democratic expression, such as parliament, 'have been used in Africa by those in power not for ensuring popular participation and mediating between governmental authority and the individual, but more as instruments of control and suppression especially of opinions that contradict government policy'.<sup>1</sup>

The current wave of multi-party politics in Africa and the popular demands for democratization of politics, economy and society, are largely a reaction to the failure of democracy under one-party regimes in Africa. In Kenya, the repeal of Section 2A of the Kenya Constitution towards the end of 1991, heralded the return to multi-party politics in the country and the genuine pursuit and implementation of democratic principles of equality, freedom and social justice. Many diverse social and economic groups of Kenyan society have high expectations and are demanding that their interests which had been previously neglected, be included in the new democratic agendas of the various political parties vying to form the next government.

The women of Kenya form perhaps the largest pressure group and are also demanding that the democratization programmes and policy plans now being mapped out must have women's issues in the mainstream. More importantly, women are demanding that there must be gender equity at all levels, including participation in high level decision-making positions of government and public life in general.

## Gender-centred democratization

The principle of equality of women and men as enshrined in various United Nations conventions dating back to 1948 and contained in national

constitutions, merely affirm rather than confer on women their God-given equal rights with men. Indeed, with or without the United Nations conventions and declarations on behalf of women, it is clear that full and effective participation, is a basic human right and a responsibility of all citizens regardless of gender.<sup>2</sup> Effective solutions to societal problems can best be achieved only when all citizens exercise their equal human rights to participate fully in the decision-making process. Indeed, it is imperative that any society that claims to be just, democratic, representative and progressive, must of necessity ensure women's significant presence and participation in high level public policy decision-making positions. This is not only because women form at least half of humanity but also because women constitute a key national resource whose ideas, creative solutions and concern for cohesiveness of the social fabric can help change the quality of life and society.

In the arena of political decision-making for example, studies have shown that if women are represented in large enough numbers, of at least 30-35 per cent of all members of parliament, they could make significant change to the dominant male political culture by putting more emphasis on such fundamental policy issues as gender equity, social justice, the environment, childcare and violence against women. Unfortunately, except for Sweden (with 38 per cent women parliamentarians) and Norway (with 36 per cent), the rest of the world has yet to attain the minimum *critical mass* of women in political decision-making capacities. Even some of the largest western 'democracies' have a very poor record of gender equity in politics. For example, at the end of 1991, the USA boasted of only 5.8 per cent women's participation in political decision-making positions while the United Kingdom had 6.4 per cent women members in its parliament. The problem of women's participation in political decision-making is undoubtedly a global one, but a democratic problem nevertheless, that we in Kenya should address with the seriousness it deserves.

## Women's marginalization in public decision-making

Kenya's record of women's participation in politics and public decision-making is pathetic by any standards. Between 1963 and 1969, there was not a single woman member of parliament. It was in November 1969 that the first woman was elected into the National Assembly and one more was nominated to sit in that august legislative body, along with 11 male nom-

inated members. Thus between 1969–1971, of the total elected members of parliament, women formed 0.5 per cent and 8 per cent of the nominated members. Except for the period 1974–1979, when women's representation improved slightly, the general trend has been one of women's marginalization in political decision-making at the national level. Indeed by 1991, out of 200 elected and nominated members of parliament, there were only two women elected parliamentarians. Of the two women members of parliament, only one sits on the front bench as an Assistant Minister for Culture and Social Services. In reality, since 1974, when the first woman was appointed to the front bench, the position of assistant minister is the highest position a woman has ever held in Kenya's national assembly. Furthermore, there has never been more than one woman holding this post at any one time.

More significantly, the lone woman assistant minister has consistently been appointed to serve in the ministry of culture and social services. Within the ruling party Kenya African National Union (KANU) hierarchy, women have had even more difficulty participating at the national executive level. Indeed, until 1989 when the KANU secretariat created the position of Director of Women and Youth Affairs, no woman had ever been elected or appointed to any of the national executive positions within the ruling party. Women's involvement in KANU was relegated to that of mere rank and file members or officials of the powerless KANU Women's Wing. Outside the political arena, the presence and participation of women in public decision-making positions has been equally dismal, with most of the prominent women being presidential appointees, starting from the early 1980s. For example, the first woman judge of the high court was appointed in 1982, the second one in 1986 and the third in 1991. In 1983, two women were appointed to head public parastatal organizations and at least 15 others were appointed in 1986. In the same year, Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi appointed two women to senior diplomatic positions. One was appointed as Kenya's representative to the Nairobi-based United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), replacing another who had earlier resigned from the post. The second was appointed the first woman high commissioner in charge of Kenya's diplomatic mission in Britain. She was replaced at the end of 1991, and appointed the second woman permanent secretary in charge of the ministry of foreign affairs and international co-operation. The first ever woman permanent secretary was appointed in 1987 in the ministry of commerce and industry. Indeed, women form only 9 per cent of those holding top-level positions in the civil service. In other critical public decision-making sectors such as the trade union movement, women's representation is pathetic. In some unions, there are no women

members and in those with some women members, none of them hold a leadership and/or decision-making position. In private corporate bodies, women's presence in the top decision-making hierarchy of large corporations is rare, although a significant number of women are to be found in the middle management levels.

With or without the current multi-party politics, Kenya's claim to be a democratic society can be contested simply on the issue of marginalization of women in politics and public decision-making. And yet there are many other areas where women's rights have been compromised or ignored. On the question of basic human rights on which all the proponents of multi-party politics converge, it is of concern that often the interpretation of human rights is narrowly conceived to exclude some critical aspects of human rights that directly relate to women. For example, rape, battering of women by men, sexual harassment and derogatory language employed by some male public figures to depict women as inferior, second-class human beings, are all gross violations of women's human rights. And yet, the frequency with which these forms of physical and psychological violence against women occur and the casualness and/or the light punitive legal action meted out to the perpetrators of these human rights abuses clearly demonstrate that the male-dominated Kenyan society has not yet appreciated the full meaning of democracy. Furthermore, certain sections of the existing legal system that also tend to discriminate against women and deny them basic human rights, on matters affecting *inter alia* family life, property ownership, and employment terms and conditions, have remained unchanged.

In the past, women have, rather passively, bemoaned their subordinate status, exploitation and denial of such basic human rights as the ones cited here. Failure of women to take action has been blamed in part on socio-cultural practices, and man-made barriers that have been erected in the political and economic arenas in a manner that excludes and marginalizes women. While all these socio-economic and political constraints to women's advancement may have served as plausible excuses for women's inaction in the past, this is no longer so in 1992. With the onset of multi-party democracy and the freedom of expression and popular participation that has ensued, women will have no one but themselves to blame if they do not seize this opportunity to ensure that their interests are included and mainstreamed in the new democratic agenda and that they participate on equal footing with men in the democratization process. In this regard, the recent case of Zambia's move to multi-party democracy should serve as a warning to Kenyan women of the danger of losing sight of the gender dimension of the democratic struggle. In the Zambian case, the women struggled along-



side men to bring about gender-blind democracy. They accomplished much in that direction. But once elections were over 'women got a rude shock. Parliament once again became an exclusively male domain'.<sup>3</sup> The next section then, proposes some strategies that women of Kenya could employ to ensure that they do not 'miss the boat' this second time around.

## Strategies for empowering women

Women's empowerment and effective participation in the democratization process in Kenya, cannot all be attained overnight. There should be two types of strategies, namely:

- *Short-term* strategies—structured around issues that must be addressed now and realistically resolved.
- *Long-term* strategies—structured around issues which, although of importance even now, cannot for various reasons be resolved now and may also need regular review and monitoring over a period of time.

### *Short-term strategies*

The short-term strategies should be structured around the issue of how women can most effectively advance their status through the participation in political decision-making in the current multi-party politics and the anticipated general elections. In this regard, women can effectively use three forms of potential power that they already control:

- (i) their numerical majority as voters in electoral politics
- (ii) their special organizational and mobilization skills
- (iii) the existing women's groups and organizations.

In regard to (i) the challenge is to sensitize women voters on the power of the vote and the merits for voting for other women rather than men. The other challenge is to convince a significant number of women with the political inclination, commitment and basic skills, to vie for parliamentary and civic leadership positions. In the past, the scarcity of women candidates has been a more serious problem than women voters' preference for male candidates.

In regard to (ii) and (iii) the challenge is for women of Kenya to devise a strategy of *Unity in Diversity*, whereby they can bring together their special organizational and mobilization skills to form a common lobbying

forum or pressure group that can sponsor its own women candidates to parliament. Although women have organized various pressure groups with the major objective being to advance women's political participation, still much needs to be done to ensure co-ordinated action, common vision and cohesiveness. Kenyan women's struggle for their empowerment has tended to be constrained by the absence of a strong women's movement and by the emphasis on social-welfarist objectives and neglect of economic and political empowerment goals. It is of greatest urgency to now create unity in diversity between the numerous women's groups, organizations and individuals. Only if women adopt a common strategy, informed by a common vision, can they effectively lobby for adequate representation in decision-making positions and influence change in the policies and structures that perpetuate their subordination.

In organizing for political action, Kenyan women should consider establishing a women's centre for political information. From this centre women could exchange political information and co-ordinate their activities to ensure that they do not waste time and scarce resources, duplicating each others' efforts. It is worth remembering that in the past one of the factors that has hindered women's political activity has been lack of information, which has tended to be disseminated through channels that men have more access to than women.

Before the next civic and parliamentary elections there is need to identify, persuade, and encourage all women who may be qualified but are too shy to come forward as candidates. All women candidates need both moral and material support from other women. As a strategy therefore, women should vigorously engage in fund-raising activities to assist women candidates who may be suitable but unable to finance the expensive election campaign. In addition, women with relevant political expertise should offer advice to women political candidates especially on campaign techniques for winning a political election. Women candidates can also be advised on the choice of a political party that best addresses gender issues and that is also likely to form the next government. Given that the majority of women voters are at the grassroots, we need to sensitize and raise women's political awareness on the power of the vote, and the pertinent gender issues that should influence their voting preferences. This could be done by setting up crash education and training programmes that can benefit women at the grassroots.

In addition, women must carefully scrutinize all the draft constitutions and manifestos of the various parties that have been formed to ensure that women's issues are contained in these policy documents. In this regard, there is need to examine not only those articles of the constitutions that

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mention women, but all other articles, if only to see whether what they recommend is likely to affect women adversely. Women should then suggest to the parties concerned how to improve their policy documents in relation to women's rights.

### *Long-term strategies*

Long-term strategies should include the following activities:

- Follow-up and monitoring the statements of intent contained in the policy documents of the party that forms the government, to ensure that they are implemented. Women parliamentarians could play an important role in this activity. There should also be a women's desk in all government ministries and other public bodies to monitor such implementation and to peruse all other development policy documents that are drawn up, in order to ensure that women's concerns form an integral part of such documents. Existing national development policies, such as Structural Adjustment Policies by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), should also be reviewed and amended to make them consistent with the new democratic agenda.
- Make sure that the laws that discriminate against women are repealed and completely removed from the statutes books.
- Maintain a women's pressure group that would consistently lobby for greater women's participation in all public decision-making positions, in addition to parliamentary politics.
- Establish training programmes to conscientize and sensitize the society at large about the linkages between gender equity, development and democracy.
- Strengthen the existing women's organizations by amending their constitutions to allow these organizations to act as political pressure groups.

## Conclusion

As shown in the foregoing analysis, the concept of democracy and the process of democratization is complex and subject to varying interpretations and manipulations. Thus there is always the danger that the noble principles of democracy, freedom, equality and social justice can be abused to serve the narrow interests of small hegemonic groups at the expense of the majority. Women historically have fallen victims to this kind of manipulation and misapplication of democracy. But they have also gradually learnt

to struggle for their rights with varying degrees of success, depending on the social, economic and political context. In Kenya, presently, the political environment is conducive for women to insist on their interests being integrated in the new democratic agenda. They can and indeed are beginning to insist that they participate in the policy-making bodies so that they can effectively influence all stages of policy design and implementation. Women should no longer be content with being mere voters for male political candidates. They should now also exercise their democratic right to contest political office. Furthermore, women should employ their voting power more wisely by voting for committed women who will represent their gender-based issues in parliament. But in constituencies with no such women candidates, women should only vote for men who are known for their personal integrity, gender sensitivity and a good development record.

It cannot be overemphasized that the new democratization process underway in Kenya could again marginalize women, just as the earlier struggle for independence, unless women themselves seize this opportunity to challenge and seek changes in their subordinate status by penetrating the decision-making centres of power and control.

## Notes

1. Oyugi and Gitonga, 1987, p. 83.
2. Nzomo, 1991(b).
3. *Daily Nation*, January 21, 1992.