

declaration of the Head of State on gender balance, in Maputo, in July 2004. At the global level, the last decade was characterized by the adoption by the international community of the Beijing Declaration and Agenda on women, as a follow-up to the Nairobi strategies (1985) and the Millennium Development objectives, which consider gender balance as a priority.

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Women and the Making of Electoral Substance

When the governments of the world met in Beijing, China, in 1995 to review the progress they had individually and collectively made or not made towards enhancing the status of women, most countries in Africa had just commenced on the road to re-instituting plural politics. More than three decades before, these same African countries had emerged out of colonialism with a pledge to uphold governance based on the popular mandate and therefore responsive to the aspirations of the African citizenry. That pledge had been reneged on by an overwhelming majority of the governments soon after they had been ushered into power.

The return to multiparty contestation for government power and the constitutional reforms that gave it structure were practically imposed by the conditionalities attached to the IMF/World Bank loans and structural adjustment programmes following popular uprisings and demand for change by Africa's suffering millions. The Beijing pledges in 1995 were thus among many of the other pledges of reform and democratisation that African governments made once more to the citizenry. The question that is often asked is whether and to what extent African governments have lived and can live up to their promise to deliver accountable governance and economic development.

Accountable governance is, however, not just a reflection of what governments do or aspire to do, but is also informed by the actions of the people under those governments. What do they do under repressive governments? To what extent do they hold governments accountable to their pledges when there is room for that kind of engagement? More pertinently, since the return to formal accountability through plural politics, what demands

have African citizens been making on the state to build sustainable democratic institutions and culture and thereby guard against regression to the kind of authoritarianism that characterised much of the

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first two and a half decades of independence?

This paper will draw from the experience of southern Africa to review progress made towards the democratisation of political space and governance practice by examining the status of women and the contribution of their struggles for greater inclusiveness, particularly in governance institutions.

Women, political parties and electoral processes before the 1990s

There are certain similarities between the manner in which the new institutions of governance in post-colonial Africa emerged to herald independence and their re-emergence in the 1990s. For instance, political parties, electoral processes and the constitutions that gave them structure and content were, in most countries in Africa, instruments largely negotiated between external powers and certain dominant national groups. At the end of colonial rule they were, in one sense, part of the conditional terms on which colonial governments were prepared to hand over power to their colonial subjects. But in another sense they were also the available means by which colonised subjects could legally channel their long-standing, legitimate anti-colonial struggles into co-

herent political programmes in the fight for independence.

With the demise of authoritarian rule in the post-colony, they were once again the instruments used by external powers to negotiate political reforms conditional on governments maintaining neo-liberal economic policies represented by structural adjustment packages. At the same time their reforms represented the aspirations of the millions of African citizens who had borne the brunt of authoritarian rule that had characterised most African states after independence. The nature and character of the development of these political instruments reflect the contradicting impulses in which they were born as products of both hegemonic external power and agents of liberation for the oppressed or those excluded from power.

Across the continent, the contradictions of constitutional reforms in African societies became manifest soon after independence when, having been used to mobilise popular support for the legitimate transfer of power from the departing colonialists, political parties and the constitutional arrangements that gave them form almost immediately began to be perceived by post-independence governments as obstructive to nation-building and state development. In reaction to this perceived threat, most post-colonial governments simply legislated against multiparty competition for government power and replaced it with single party systems.¹ The same impulse by the governing elite to see multiparty competition as a threat are reflected in the resistance to more substantive reform and the persisting repressive tendencies in many states.

With regards to women, virtually all political institutions in Africa have historically shared the common characteristic of relegating women's political participation

to ancillary organs and maintaining the governing centres for male participation. Although initially instituted as a concession to women's aspirations as the South African case would suggest, for most countries these ancillary women organs were reduced to providing women space to organise support for male politicians through fundraising, canvassing the female vote, and generally providing entertainment for the male dignitaries during party congresses and other gatherings. This state of affairs came to be challenged from the 1980s and increasingly in the 1990s in the context of a broad-based expression of citizen disenchantment with the political and economic governance performance of African states in the wake of structural adjustment and stalled economic growth.

In Botswana, the oldest democracy in the region, an unbroken record of free and fair elections had never raised the level of female representation in the legislature to more than 5 per cent until after the Beijing conference and after considerable pressure from political mobilisation campaigns of a radical women's organisation, *Emang Basadi*.² Similarly in South Africa which had the longest history of political party mobilisation on the continent, women accounted for less than 5 per cent in party leadership and national legislatures before the advent of universal suffrage and the ascendance of majority rule in the 1990s. And in Africa's former one party states or military regimes, women's representation in governance structures was similarly negligible and generally not more than 10 per cent.

The domestication of political parties and electoral politics

By the early 1990s, and against the background of the United Nations' Women's Convention on Discrimination, African women had begun to mobilise nationally and regionally in a bid to launch themselves into the national legislatures and political parties, and thus increase their share and influence in the top echelons of governance institutions and processes.

In Botswana, the onslaught was led by the *Emang Basadi Women's Association*, which developed a Women's Manifesto summarising the marginalisation of women and demanding redress from political parties and government. The impact of their strategy was seen in the concessions made by political parties to increase

women's representation in central party organs and the legislature. In parliament, women's share rose from a previous maximum of 5 per cent in the 1980s to 17 per cent by the 2004 elections. At cabinet level women increased from the previous average of 6 per cent to 24 per cent in 2004.³ But the representation was exclusively from the contributions made by the ruling party, despite the fact that the main opposition party benefited greatly from the women's political education programme and increased their share of parliamentary seats to a historical high of 33 per cent of the elected seats and 45 per cent of the votes in 1994.

In the party structures themselves, there has been slightly better progress towards wider representation of women beyond the historical positions of leadership of women's wings. For instance, although the ruling party currently has no women in its executive, it has 25 per cent female representation in the Central Committee. The main opposition party, the Botswana National Front, has done even better as it has now achieved 26 per cent female representation in its Central Committee, and 12 per cent in its executive committee of seven members. But it has failed to follow the example of other leftist parties in the region and effectively use a quota system to achieve greater gender equity in the selection of parliamentary candidatures since the problems of 1998.

For the newest African democracy of South Africa, the Women's National Coalition played a critical role in mobilising women across the national political spectrum to workshop and identify key issues of concern in terms of needs and aspirations which would be turned into a coherent agenda for bargaining during the process of rebuilding the nation and the state into a genuine democracy.⁴ This social mobilisation programme culminated in a new National Women's Charter whose content the women wanted integrated into new policies and programmes for a free South Africa. The charter was formally adopted by the Coalition of 92 women's NGOs in 1994 following extensive consultations across the country. Both the Charter and the Coalition played a key role in gendering the framing of South Africa's new constitution between 1994 and 1998. And that ensured that the women would secure their rights very firmly in both the foun-

ation of the nation and the instruments of democratic governance.

The result has been a dramatic increase in women's access to decision-making positions and processes within the party as well as government. Within the ruling ANC party, the share of women has increased from 20 per cent in the early post-apartheid years to 33 per cent in April 2004 in the national executive. At the pinnacle of the party's governing structure the ANC is 14 per cent female. Among the directly elected members of the executive committee, women account for 47 per cent of the members. They also account for 50 per cent of ex-officio members: including the president of the Women's League.

The experience of most of southern Africa's former one party states has been more sobering. After years of the repression of liberties and the silencing of dissent, the political parties in the former single party states have come out of the woods into a veritable Tower of Babel where they are practically speaking in different tongues and drowning each other out. Insufficient respect for the rule of law and human rights on the part of governments is still a factor that seriously undermines the capacity of citizens to engage in meaningful political contestation and civil society mobilisation. The result is that, although electoral environments have steadily improved, they have not persistently paved the way for further enhancements in governmental protection of civil liberties and therefore the integrity of processes of political choice. Sachikonye (2002) also notes that although political parties have been important instruments in encouraging participation in the electoral process, they are still fragile in most of southern Africa.

The mobilisation activities associated with preparations for the Beijing conference gave an impetus to pressures for reform: particularly with regard to the creation of independent spaces for political mobilisation and other areas of civil society concern. But in many instances the ruling parties short-circuited national debates and thus circumvented constructive negotiations and hurtled ill-prepared countries towards multiparty elections with poorly developed constitutional and institutional support. This has undermined the efforts made by national women's organisations and lobby groups to pressure effectively for greater women's representation. Not surprisingly, except

for the Seychelles, women's representation has been variable and generally poor in these countries. In Mozambique, for instance, the remarkable improvements in the legislature are not reflected in cabinet where the major decisions are made. Similarly, modest improvements in other countries' legislatures are also not reflected equally in the cabinets.⁵

In a few African countries, there has even been regression in relation to strides towards plural politics and enhancement of women's status. Zimbabwe, Angola, Swaziland and the Democratic Republic of Congo are prime examples of this regression. In Zimbabwe, after a promising start to recognise the role that women had played during the liberation war, the regime has now regressed into oppressive authoritarianism with little commitment to increasing the share of women in decision-making positions. On the contrary, women's representation has dropped below the initial 12 per cent since the Beijing conference. In Angola, continuing war and internal strife have undermined any potential for this country to start building itself and allow for meaningful political participation. So that a decade after Beijing 1995, Angola is still to get to the starting line in terms of the march to democratic reform and the building of meaningful institutions for plural politics. Notwithstanding the situation, women do account for 14 per cent of Angola's cabinet and 15 per cent of its parliament.⁶ Swaziland is yet to emerge from its retreat from a constitutional monarchy, and in politics only the King knows what is in the best interest of the people, and women are still regarded as minors.

Challenges ahead

Since the restitution of multiparty systems in many countries, there has been considerable interest in examining electoral processes and their role in enhancing democratic governance and legitimising state authority. This interest does not however extend to the interrogation of the efficacy of political parties as key agents in the electoral processing of power. On the contrary, the debate on the electoral systems presupposes that the key institutional players in this process, political parties, in fact represent the aspirations of the electorate and that the general elections merely come into play to arbitrate as to which of the contesting parties is deemed by the voting majority as best capturing their aspirations and concerns.

In Botswana's long and uninterrupted experience with electoral politics, however, women's struggle for inclusion in the electoral processing of power has revealed the weaknesses of political parties and their attendant electoral systems as sites of undemocratic practice and exclusionary politics. The women's lobby was thus the first to fire salvos at the political party system and its tendency to return one party to power and thus undermine the capacity of interest groups to bargain meaningfully with their votes for political concessions. As the voting public has become aware of the meaning of the electoral process, the role of political parties and the link between their vote and the outcomes of elections, the issues of how representative is the continuum of political party formation, the internal processes of political party decision-making, and the ultimate process of national election, have come to be interrogated.

The debate on whether the winner-takes-all electoral systems now practised at both party and general elections levels in Botswana is less efficient than proportional representation therefore raises fundamental questions for the democratisation of the internal workings of political parties. For while proportional representation potentially promises greater delivery of female candidates as has been witnessed in countries adopting this system, it is premised on the political leadership maintaining a firm grip on decision-making within the party, much as has been the case with Botswana's simple majority electoral system. The experience of neighbouring South Africa is a relevant contrasting model for critically examining where democratic practice ideally should be located. In South Africa, the adoption of the proportional representation system was an outcome of protracted negotiations. It was based on the premise that the simple majority system would not be adequate for a society undergoing major transition as it tended to over-value the support of the winning party and under-value the support of others. The system would thus provide a base for a government of national unity representing the widest number of contesting political parties. However, in terms of management, it relied on party lists based largely on the decision of the party leadership.

The stark question African women must ask in seeking electoral substance is how to democratise both the internal workings

of political parties and the national electoral systems to enhance inclusive representation?

Notes

1. In Botswana, however, this perceived threat was dealt with, not through drastic legislative means, but through a process of income distribution spread so judiciously across the domiciles of ethnic communities as to preclude the wholesale transfer of allegiance from the incumbent party.
2. This is Setswana for 'Stand up, Women!', which was a call for women to stand up and fight for their rights. The mid-1980s saw the emergence of a number of civil society organisations that reflected Botswana's diversifying interests and the rise of a critical mass of educated urbanised citizens.
3. The first time a woman entered parliament and the cabinet in Botswana was in 1974 with the special election of Dr Gaositwe Chiepe who had also been one of the first women to hold a senior post in the public service.
4. In 1954 they had also been instrumental in developing a Women's Charter addressed generally to all progressive organisations and demanding among other things equality between women and men and stating that 'We shall teach men that they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and practice' (Women's Charter Adopted at the Founding Conference of the Federation of South African Women, Johannesburg, 17 April 1954).
5. For details see Selolwane (2006), 'Gendered Spaces in party politics in Southern Africa: Progress and Regress since Beijing 1995'. Occasional paper No. 13, UNRISD: Geneva.
6. Parliament has simply extended its mandate in the light of the difficulties of holding elections. The Lusaka Protocol for power sharing among those parties that had won seats in the 1992 elections has ensured that there is a legitimate government of sorts in power.

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