

Marginalising women in Somali politics

Somali women can become integral pillars of the "political survival" of future governments, writes Cawo M Abdi, *Al Jazeera*, 24 August 2012



Having 30 plus women in the Somali parliament is actually an enormous achievement which "shows that there are many women competent and willing to fill public office" [EPA]

Somalia has recently selected its parliament on Somali soil for the first time since the civil war of the late 1980s. This is a significant achievement since regional power brokers such as Ethiopia and Kenya, with the financial and logistical backing of the European Union, the United States and the United Nations, concocted Somali governments in neighbouring countries.

Such success is unfortunately marred by controversies, with continuous allegations of corruption in the selection of the members of parliament, as well as persistent charges that millions of international donor funds intended for Somali security and basic infrastructure ended up in the pockets of a few men in top leadership positions.

While international news coverage of the above shady political process is repeated *ad nauseam*, the status of the 30 per cent quota for women in current parliament-approved constitution rarely gets any ink.

My reading is that international media outlets as well as Somali journalists take it for granted that failure of fulfilling this quota is best explained by the Islamic faith of the Somali people. This is often cited as being in conflict with decrees imposed from outside by international actors who allegedly paid for the hefty cost of \$60m for the current constitution, and who also provide the salaries of former MPs and senior government leaders.

Sectarian and opportunistic men

Given the above power dynamic, Somalis acknowledge that though you should never bite the hand that feeds you, there can still be areas of serious contention between what international donors demand and what is possible in the Somali context. Thus the international community's imposition of a 30 per cent quota for women in parliament is accepted to be included in the final draft of the constitution, even if all the signatories did not support such allocation.

Sifting through the names of the 202 MPs released by the Technical Selection Committee in the last few days, 30 of the names are women, or approximately 15 per cent of the constitutionally mandated 30 per cent. This 15 per cent of women's positions were achieved after weeks of haggling where male clan leaders were cajoled to include women in their nominations.

Having 30 plus women in this parliament is actually an enormous achievement. It shows that there are many women competent and willing to fill public office. In fact, given the tremendously constructive role Somali women continue to play in Somali social and economic life since the wars of the late 1980s, Somali women have proven, beyond any shadow of doubt, that they are the backbone of the survival of Somali society. There is no reason to doubt that they can also become integral pillars of the political survival of future governments.

My dozen years of sociological research with Somali women convinces me that Somali women know their invaluable contributions to Somali life. They also know that this contribution can be extended to the political process and in the search for durable stability and peace.

So what is stopping Somali women from playing this vital role? Sectarian and opportunistic men who utilise clan and religious politics represent a threat for women and their prospects of political inclusion. Extending the nomadically inherited active and public role that Somali women occupy in the social and economic well-being of the household into the political sphere threatens the already stiff competition for limited leadership positions.

The Chairman of the Supreme Religious Council in Somalia often leads the voices of those striving to impose a particular definition of what Islam is in Somalia and how any new government should deal with gender issues in "Sharia" complaint way. With the approval of the current constitution at the beginning of August for example, this council disputed some constitutional provisions that mostly relate to women, arguing that these provisions are contrary to Islam.

Denying positions of leadership

While Somali elite politicians as well as traditional and religious leaders push for the exclusion of women in positions of power, they completely remain silent on the fact that the majority of Somali women spend their full days and at times part of the night eking their families' livelihoods in the streets of all urban and rural areas. These leaders refuse to admit that for the majority of the men selected as MPs, it is probably their wives, daughters and sisters who keep the home fire burning, feeding and maintaining the children, the elderly and even these MPs with their sweat, stubbornness and skillfulness.

Selectively denying women positions of leadership, in the name of culture and religion, when accepting that these women are indispensable in all spheres of Somali society, is hypocritical. Somali sectarian politicians are abusing their male power in a very patriarchal society, but camouflaging this abuse with cultural and religious rhetoric.

Somali women are part and parcel of everyday public life. The survival of the Somali nation rides on the backs of women. Men remain silent on this contribution as it underscores their inability to fulfill all family needs. Somali women remain silent about their contributions for

fear of the type of abuse routinely inflicted on women in a politically unstable region, and for fear of challenging the untenable role of men as providers of their families.

The current sectarian rhetoric imposed on Somalis is filled with contradictions, and is a deformation of what Somali culture and Somali Islam used to be. The culture that many of us grew up with, that thrived in this Horn African region for centuries, is unfortunately in retreat. A sectarian dogma confronted with Somali socio-economic reality is producing schizophrenic political and religious establishment detrimentally impacting Somali women and their potential contributions to the reconstruction of a viable nation state.

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