

# **Democratic Transformation and the Participation of Women in Political Institutions in the Sudan**

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The full participation of women in political institutions at all levels demands a number of conditions and certain guiding principals, which should shape the coming structure of the emerging society.

First of these guiding principals is the establishment of a secular state with clear separation of religion from the state.

The second is the democratization of all forms of life starting with the family and ending with all state institutions.

The third principal is the adoption of a sustainable road of development and fair sharing of national wealth, in a society of peaceful culture that recognizes the cultural diversity and prevailing ethnic, and religious differences. The new Sudan should respect human rights as well as women's rights and the individual and private rights of every single woman.

## **Secularism and women's equality**

In relation to rights of women, secularism does not end at separation of religion and state but creates a society in which women can enjoy their human dignity and give them the right to look critically on the ideology of exploitation especially, that of patriarchy, which dominates in the Sudan. Wherever there is a full stop now, we should put a firm question mark. Nothing should be left unturned. And we women shall bear the brunt of the huge efforts needed, because we carry now the brunt of exploitation and derogatory mishandlings. We should work together to enable the birth of a new Sudan and should never again shout or shoot at each other across ethnics, religious or cultural divides.

## **The need for secularism**

A secular society is one based on knowledge, science and culture. It is not anti religion per se. It relies on experience, not faith, which has its rightful place within the church and the mosque. It allows people articulate their opinions without the punishment of a religious state. We do not have to look very far to be convinced that a secular state is the only option to the arbitrary dictatorship of a religious one. The Sudan is a case in point.



Before the term became popular in Arabic, people used the term civil society to describe the separation of state and religion. Not until the 20s of last century did the term enter the vocabulary of political science. Secularism in Arabic is *Ilmania*, which is derived from the word *Ilm*, meaning science. The scholar Aziz Al Azm explains:

“It is true that some differences in defining and practicing secularism did exist between Catholic and Protestant scholars, but the two sides had so much more in common. They accepted that the institution of religion should have equal rights as all other social institutions. This entails that none of these intuitions have the right to force its ideology and practice upon the others. It is not easy to define secularism, because it is the product of historical changes in the fields of politics, culture and social sciences and practices.

The ultimate climax of these historical transformations is the final separation of the state from religion”

A secular state is the prerequisite of a peaceful society, where faith is a matter of conscience not the courts. And in the case of the Sudan, it is a powerful unifying factor, because it allows us to focus on the important issues of development, democracy and human rights. All attempts at forced Islamization have aggravated social peace and drove social and political conflicts into bloody armed conflicts. Dividing our people into Muslims and non-Muslims is a recipe for disaster.

We are citizens of the same state and it is our right to share our wealth and our government on the basis of citizenship not faith, gender ethnic or cultural affiliations.

In the Sudan, the Sharia laws introduced by general Numeiri in September 1983 and subsequently also known as September Laws, constituted one of the issues that precipitated the second civil war. In addition, the current Islamic regime has passed many so-called Islamic laws that life in the country has been devastated by war and violations of human rights. The problem is that all religious laws automatically become divine laws and the rulers become direct agents of God. Critiquing them becomes not a civil offence, but an offence against God himself. Civil law becomes Sharia law. The authority and power the rulers incur through this process are overwhelming. No wonder that hundred thousands of Sudanese fled the country or took up arms to challenge the cultural and physical attacks perpetrated by the brutal regime.

Our call for a secular state is often countered by the question, and where will Islam then go, if you decouple it from the state! The answer is simple. Religion moves out of the state sphere to enter the personal domain and thus becomes an inherent feature of personal freedom, which is entitled to the respect and protection, guaranteed by the constitution and the laws of the land. And as to the existing religious organizations and societies, they in turn become part of the Sudanese civil society and take their authority and legitimacy from the laws that govern civil society. Like all other civil organizations, they can fully operate within the prevailing laws

The secular society we call for is being critiqued by many of those who want to perpetuate the status quos as anti Islam and would do away with our moral values and expose the people to alien cultures and indecent practices.

On the country, a secular state would foster tolerance and acceptance of ethnic, religious and cultural differences. We will then celebrate our variety and enjoy the amazing spectrum of the Sudanese cultures. Secularism supports and enhances our heterocultural



diversity. I repeat, a secular state is a peaceful state and the first and most important step towards social and economic progress.

### **Religion and the liberation of women**

Analysis of the ideologies that justify or 'explain' the so-called inferiority of women embodies three basic elements of social bias, class, race and sexuality. With the alarming growth of Islamists movements the debate pertaining to religion and women liberation has intensified. The main issue in the debate is whether religion promotes the liberation of women or does it indeed slow it down! Is Islam a liberating force for women? For a plausible answer let us turn to the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid:

“The discussion of women issues outside its social reality can easily lead to the use of the abstractions of concrete social entities.....ending into narrowing the debate on women problems into comparing the female versus the male and the discussion is reduced to comparing biological traits. This is how the religious discourse ends by putting the male at the centre of attention.” And keeps the women at the periphery, I hasten to add.

The most glaring discrepancy between the Islamist discourse and the secular discourse lies in their definition of nationalism. Islamists give primacy to the shared faith (Al Umma Al Islamia) as the corner stone of a nation The Umma of Islam goes beyond geographical boundaries to embrace all Muslims in the world. However, the secular definition relies on shared economic interests, shared history and shared space, yet allows debates on all aspects of life and death. It unites the citizens of any given state to further refine and define the dialectics of give and take in the given country.

The debate among Sudanese women is in full swing covering issues such as how can we achieve women liberation, what means to use and ways to go. Among us runs also the discussion on economic and social development, whether the capitalist way of development the only feasible one after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites or may be it is better to discard some crucial elements of capitalism, for example, the exploitation of the poor espially in the developing world and the unsustainable grabbing of our common natural wealth in an ever growing pace. I believe that all women organizations and institutions irrespective of political affiliation should work together to promote our liberation. This entails that we move beyond our nation to embrace the growing international movements working for women liberation, against racial discrimination as well as those working for peace and against new Nazism. We must add our voice to those movements that are trying to reduce the unprecedented exploitation of our natural resources and seek to create a far better sustainable future for all mankind and women kind

Religion considers the biological differences between male and female as of crucial importance in formulating its attitude towards women liberation. It goes further and narrows the human rights of women in all spheres of life, for example, the right to work, to creativity and creation, to enjoyment of our life and our sexuality.

Women problems are inherently economic, social and political. The issue of the division of power starts right at home and encroaches on to cover the whole society. The point of vantage for these ill-fated discrepancies and injustices is the biological interpretation of



gender. (I was born a women, I became a female). Thus women issues become religious issues, subject to religious interpretations by whoever happened to be at the helm of the religious state. This fact smuggles into the debate a huge junk of subjectivity and arbitrariness. The rulers define the degree of our humanity, the awards of our work, the space within which we are allowed to move and create and even the fate of all our endeavors in life.

With insignificantly small periods of time, Islamic rule has always been an arbitrary brutal dictatorship. The turmoil around the French and the industrial revolutions has brought about the gradual and bloody separation of state and religion in Europe. Europe's economic liberation has catalyzed positive changes to women as well as to others struggling for equality. Not quite so for Jewish women, on whom the stranglehold is so strong and indeed most alarming.

In sub-Saharan Africa the situation looked better. Women played a much greater role in economic, social and spiritual life of the people. Plausible explanation for this state of affairs is perhaps that the economic and social developments had not fully submerged matriarchy in those societies. Contrary to European women, African women did not experience the brutal murder of millions of intelligent women on the pretext that powerful women were and must be witches. Also the relative isolation of sub-Saharan Africa might have helped in not allowing the emergence of full patriarchic dominance. Whatever the reasons behind the relative strength of African women, we are certainly proud of our mothers and their mothers, who played prominent roles in the political, social and spiritual life of their lands.

Even before the intrusion of colonialism, we encounter women queens so-called *Kindacat*. African queens were prominent all over the continent and traditions from those periods still linger on and give us strength to day to continue the struggle for total liberation.

### **Democratic rights and representation of women in New Sudan**

Although we highly appreciated the agreement signed by all members of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in favour of separation of state and religion and their assertion to abide by all international agreements pertaining to the liberation of women, including the *Cedaw* Protocol.

However, we were extremely disappointed by 'clause five' of the Asmara Agreement signed in Asmara in 1995 and presented to the world as a document of enlightenment and liberation,

However they took away with the left hand what they gave with the right one.

Clause five stipulates giving women extensive rights, BUT ONLY WITHIN THE PREVAING TRADITIONS AND BELIEVES OF THE PEOPLE AND IN ACCORD WITH THE CONSTITUTION WHICH CONSIDERS Islam as one of its major sources.

We are adamant that this clause should immediately be withdrawn, because it makes no sense spending time discussing other issues and the threat of clause five still hovering over our heads.

This clause is not only anti the Asmara Agreement. It is also patently against most inter-



national agreements defending women rights and liberation, like the *Cedaw* Protocol. One of the silliest arguments I heard was that some participants in Asmara had not actually intended any harm and were not fully aware that the clause in any way contradicts the just demands of the women movements. We have been fighting for our rights in modern organized ways since 1945 beginning with the *Union of Women Teachers* continuing to today's myriad of women organizations.

The multitude of women organizations that has sprung in the Sudan during the last thirty years are wonderful in their diverse means and ways. Similarly, Sudanese women in the diaspora have organized themselves for the cause of liberating the Sudan and themselves.

How sad it is that the political parties of the opposing, NDA, have exposed themselves as mere men's clubs. The current Islamic regime is the worst perpetrator of crimes against the Sudanese society in general and against women in particular. And yet, in stealth, the opposition is giving only lip service to the radical solutions needed for women liberation. Where are the rights and political role of women in the NDA? We scarcely see women representatives of the Umma Party (UP) or of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)? You would think that the Communist Party and the Sudanese People Liberation Movement would be different. In theory they trump up their progressiveness in practice, however, they fail to stand to their proclamations. It is indeed true that the CP and SPLM have gone further than other Sudanese parties in recognizing the importance of women liberation. Yet their leadership has only token representation of women. The same is true for Trade Unions belonging to the NDA. It does not look well for the new Sudan, when progressive parties and organizations talk the talk but not walk the walk

We demand 50% women participation in all political institutions, especially those that will draft the constitution and determine the principals upon which the law will be based. This is what we aspire to now, However, we are ready to discuss the details and the ways and means through which this demand can be realized, given the prevailing prejudices and complexities of the Sudanese situation.

To highlight the injustice inflicted on women, all we have to do is look into the composition of the delegations that signed the Nifasha Peace Agreement. Only a handful of women, none of whom had been assigned a crucial role in the discussions that are supposed to transform the Sudan!

Now that the peace agreement has been signed and its implementation has begun, let us hope that the SPLM would allow women to fully participate in this historical task at all levels of responsibility. They have endured great misery during the war and its time they be redeemed for their great sacrifices.

It is indeed time for all political parties to reexamine its programmes on women issues and women liberation in full and equal consultation with their women members and other women organizations. With exception of clause five, the Asmara declaration signed by all parties of the NDA would be a good blue print on how to implement a far-reaching degree of women participation in all political activities at all levels of responsibility and ensure democratic compliance to the principal of equal rights and responsibilities for all. If these parties and organizations are not able or not willing to sustain democracy within their ranks, how can they ever bring democracy to the people, the government, the laws



and the constitution?

The NDA has unfortunately missed many opportunities to convince the majority of Sudanese of its good intentions. Women and youth were especially disappointed in their weak opposition to the regime and the willingness of some NDA members to seek defeatist compromises with the Islamists. It will take genuine efforts to convince this majority to support them. They will have to stand up for real democracy or face the possibility of fading away.

### **The constitutional authority**

We are 50% of the population and it is only just and right that we should occupy 50% of the seats in all existing or envisaged constitutional authorities. We insist to be there ourselves and thanks and no thanks again for those men who want to speak on our behalf. Sudanese women are now the majority of the student population. We have experts in all fields of knowledge and expertise. We can think, we can decide and we can do. We organized ourselves in the mid40s of the 20th century at the same time the current political parties were established. We are indeed keen and very able to represent ourselves.

### **The executive authority**

We certainly also demand 50% representation in all executive bodies. We do not accept token gifts. The time for tokenism is passé. Women are capable and are working at all levels of government, only they're at too few of them. We know that even in developed countries the goal of equal representation has not been reached yet. But I have never heard or read that women allover the world have dropped this demand. Equality in all matters and at all levels is the hope we will cherish until we achieve it. There will be some temporary compromises, but that is what they are, temporary.

We propose the establishment of a ministry for women, which will champion women issues and concerns. This new ministry must have strong consultative power to other ministries dealing with women problems and concerns, especially such ministries that deal with education, health, and housing etcetera. Such a body, as the ministry for women, will give us assurance that the government is serious in its proclaimed policies and that women can oversee that our society is really going in the right direction.

### **The election board**

To ensure that all state authorities comply with the equal representation of women, we must take half the seats of all election committees allover the country from the highest to lowest level. We have been pushed aside so many times. In election bodies we can oversee that women register in the electoral list and that they would vote and make their presence a formidable reality that no one can overlook or walk over.

We do not have a problem with men as a gender; we have a problem with them as patriarchs. Sudanese women, like all women in other African countries have fought alongside men for the liberation of our land from colonialism. We were and still are comrades with





those who respect our rights in words and deeds. To liberate all men, we shall help our country gain real democracy and sustainable development and full human rights, because the democracy we are working to achieve is not only juristic, but also economic and social.

My research on women problems and concerns has convinced me that all the women I spoke and wrote to have many common concerns. There is absolutely no reason why we should not work together, across all ideological and other divides to realize those common objectives.

In this spirit, we should seek what unites us and work together for it.

We do not all share the same points of views on all issues, but if we have so much in common, we have something that can bring us together, albeit for limited objectives and limited time.

Indeed our common future starts now.

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