

The Political Representation of Women in Totalitarian States: A Case Study of Eritrea⁴

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Abstract

Over a decade after the Eritrean government started its crackdown on political opponents, journalists, university students etc., the political situation in Eritrea has deteriorated from bad to worse. If there were any hopes that international condemnations might result in improving the disastrous human rights situation in Eritrea, they now are completely dashed. Despite this, and the current totalitarian political atmosphere in the country, where neither dissenting views nor opposition political parties are tolerated, it has been argued the situation of women has shown considerable progress. Government officials and their supporters argue that unlike in other countries, where women have to wait decades, Eritrean women were automatically granted with their political rights as soon as independence was achieved in 1991; and that their political participation has “increased” dramatically in the post-independence period. Therefore, the aim of this article is to investigate (1) What the political representation of women would look like in a country where national elections are yet to take place; (2) Why are women still under-represented in higher decision-making positions in Eritrea? In so doing the author will examine the policy of the *People’s Front for Democracy and Justice*

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(PFDJ) with regard to women; and analyze the representation of women in higher decision-making positions. In investigating these issues, the author will apply both domestic and international theories to examine the factors that hinder or facilitate gender equality and the political representation and participation of women. In particular, it will build on theories that deal with why the political under-representation of women might matter and the theoretical arguments for parity between women and men in formal politics.

Introduction

The former Italian colony of Eritrea is home to a multi-ethnic population estimated at 3,735,560 (Ministry of Education 2008: 2). Italy's departure from Eritrea in 1941, which was hastened by its defeat in World War II, was followed by a UN-mandated British Administration lasting ten years. This, in turn, was followed by another ten-year federation (1952-1962) with Ethiopia, whose terms were systematically abrogated by Ethiopia, igniting the thirty-year (1961-1991) struggle for independence (hereafter the Revolution) by Eritreans. Until this time Eritrea was generally categorized as a feudal or semi-feudal country demonstrating strict gender-differentiated roles with its multi-ethnic society respecting not only vastly different customary and civil codes, but also ascribing varying roles to females (Campbell 2005: 378). The Revolution eventually resulted in Eritrea's *de facto* independence on May 24, 1991 under the leadership of the *Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)*; ending only with a 1993 UN-monitored referendum, where the Eritrean people overwhelmingly voted in favor of independence. Soon afterwards, the EPLF formed a provisional government declaring that during a four-year transition period it would draft and ratify a constitution; promulgate laws on political parties and the press, and carry out elections for a constitutional government. The Constitution, drafted after four years of deliberations, was ratified on May 23, 1997, and is considered by some as a "more progressive constitution vis-à-vis women" (Campbell 2005: 378), although it has yet to come into effect. A press law was promulgated and implemented, but private press existed

only from September 2000-September 2001.⁵ This despite the fact that the Constitution's Article 7(7) clearly stating that, "The State shall create conditions necessary for developing a democratic political culture defined by free and critical thinking, tolerance and national consensus." Elections for a constitutional government have been postponed indefinitely, initially because of the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, and later under the guise of no-war-no-peace situation with the same country. Despite this, President Isaias Afwerki rules the nation with an iron fist claiming to govern for the people, although opponents continue to question the legitimacy of such an assertion in the absence of any national elections. Moreover, since September 2001 his government has been ruthlessly cracking down on political opponents, journalists, university students and so on. For more than a decade international human rights organizations (such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), the United Nations, Eritrean political and human rights activists, just to mention a few, have condemned the incessant arbitrary detention of people of all walks of life based on explicit or inferred opposition to President Isaias Afwerki's totalitarian rule.⁶ Under the leadership of President Isaias Afwerki, Human Rights Watch states that, "Eritreans suffer arbitrary and indefinite detention; torture; inhumane conditions of confinement; restrictions on freedom of speech, movement, and belief; and indefinite conscription and forced labor in national service" (Human Rights Watch, World Report 2012: Eritrea). This is, indeed, true. Hence, Eritreans of all walks of life are fleeing the country at very high rates seeking safety and freedom from one of the world's most tyrannical governments; and in the process making Eritrea the largest creator of refugees in the world. To make matters worse, since the second half of 2012 President Isaias Afwerki has been arming the entire population, men and women alike, with AK-47s and organizing them into

⁵ Currently, Eritrea despises freedom of the press, and no free press has been allowed to function inside the country since 2001. For more information refer to the Human Rights Watch Report, Ten Long Years: A Briefing on Eritrea's Missing Political Prisoners, September 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/eritrea0911WebForUpload.pdf> (28.12.2011).

⁶ For instance, see the 2012 Human Rights Watch Report on Eritrea at <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-eritrea> (20.12. 2012).

what is known as people's army.⁷ Thus, it is in obliviousness to this reality that government officials and their supporters argue the situation of women in Eritrea has dramatically improved. Where did this narrative come from? It was during the Revolution that Eritrean women were said to have had experienced extensive changes in their role, status, and perspectives. They participated actively throughout the Revolution in all fields both as support personnel and frontline soldiers, making up 30-35 percent of the total EPLF army (Zerai 1994: WS64), and constituting up to 13 percent of its frontline fighters (Connell 1998: 189). The dramatic role undertaken by women fighters during the Revolution and the assimilation to the male order that they underwent obliged supporters of the EPLF, in particular those who believed in its "enlightened" policy on women, to be optimistic about the status that women would enjoy in independent Eritrea:

"...a unique factor was emerging in the extensive areas which have been under the EPLF control for a decade and a half. Here a whole generation has grown up with the notion of women's equality. Many of these youngsters cannot remember the days before 1973 when there were no women fighters, or before 1977 when there were no people's assemblies, or when women did not defend their villages as people's militia. They know that women's emancipation is a priority taken on during the war and not shelved till after the revolution. The women of this generation are fully equipped to carry on the struggle for women's emancipation...And, perhaps because of the sacrifices they have made and the scale of their military and political participation; they have a strong sense of their democratic rights: they will demand that any future leaders of Eritrea will be accountable to them" (Wilson 1991: 153).

⁷ For instance, refer to awate.com's report of December 13, 2012, titled: Eritrean Strongman Asks Qatar To Mediate Dispute With Ethiopia, <http://awate.com/eritrean-strongman-asks-qatar-to-mediate-dispute-with-ethiopia/> (24.12.2012).

PFDJ Policy With Regard to Women

As the above citation reveals optimism was very high not only amongst foreign observers of the EPLF like Wilson, who hoped that their expectations would not be disappointed; but also in the entire nation with dawning of a new era in 1991. Therefore, it can be argued that the hope for equal political representation in Eritrea was based on the belief that the “empowered women” of the liberation era would demand from not only the EPLF leaders, but also any future leadership of Eritrea, a level of accountability should they falter on their promises. However, two decades after independence Eritrea is still governed by the Front/Party that liberated it. The questions that need to be asked are: Has the PFDJ lived up to its expectations? And have the “empowered women” of the Revolution demanded that the PFDJ leaders honor their promises? In order to answer these questions and analyze the PFDJ policy with regard to women in contemporary Eritrea, it is imperative to begin with the promises made by the EPLF, as a precursor of the PFDJ.

Since it splintered from the *Eritrean Liberation Front* in 1970, the EPLF has continued to dominate Eritrean politics until the present. The EPLF, which saw itself as struggling against “backward,” “reactionary,” and “feudal” elements of traditional culture, as well as against colonialism, made women part of its cultural revolution (Bernal 2001: 135). The EPLF thought gender barriers could be broken down only when women participate in social, economic and political activities. As the Revolution era slogan sums it up: “Equality through Equal Participation” was intended to bring about women’s equality (Bernal 2001: 134). Although the EPLF policy on women since the beginning focused on promoting gender equality within the wider context of achieving equality for all Eritreans, the Revolution was full of promises to support women’s liberation. In particular, the EPLF in its January 31, 1977 (revised 1987) National Democratic Program (NDP) promised to: (1) develop an association through which women could participate in the struggle against colonial aggression and for social transformation; (2) outline a broad program to free women from domestic confinement, develop their participation in social production, and raise their political, cultural and technical levels; (3) assure women full rights of equality with men in politics, economy, and social life as well as equal pay for equal work; (4) promulgate progressive marriage and family laws; (5)

protect the right of women workers to two months of maternity leave with full pay; (6) protect the rights of mothers and children and provide delivery, nursery and kindergarten services; (7) fight to eradicate prostitution; (8) respect the right of women not to engage in work harmful to their health; and (9) design programs to increase the number and upgrade the quality of women leaders and public servants (Wilson 1991: 161).⁸ Moreover, beyond making these declarations of intent towards women and expressing its support to the principle of gender equality as part of its vision for the establishment a people's democratic state, the EPLF also pledged to advance the interests of the masses of workers, peasants and other democratic forces, and to respect and protect people's democratic rights.⁹ (Wilson 1991: 155, 166).

The EPLF was renamed the PFDJ in February 1994 at the Front's Third Congress (Markakis 1995: 126). As indicated above, the EPLF, as a Marxist oriented organization, sought to eliminate oppressive policies and practices as it proceeded towards establishing a new society. What this means is that it gave its support to the principle of gender equality as a part of its endorsement of social equality for all in the establishment of a people's democratic state. In independent Eritrea, the PFDJ, as the incarnation of the EPLF, recognizes the quest for gender equality as a struggle to achieve equal opportunities for both men and women in social, cultural, economic and political spheres within the greater struggle to achieve the ideal of socio-economic development for all. The emphasis here is not on equality of results but rather on equality of opportunities. The principle of gender equality articulated in the *National Policy on Gender and Action Plan* (NPGAP), also states, "Eritrea's gender policy is part of the national development goals" (NPGAP 2003: 6). These being the overarching principles, it is essential to analyze what the other policies provide vis-à-vis

⁸ In its revised program approved in 1987, the EPLF adopted more or less similar points. For details see Wilson (1991: 172).

⁹ In both the 1977 and 1988 NDPs, Eritreans were promised the protection of their basic democratic rights; equality before the law, and the right to freely and fairly elect their representatives for the National Assembly and other organs of government. Unfortunately, two decades after independence Eritreans find themselves under the dictatorship of the Front that promised them liberation and the protection of their democratic rights.

women, and investigate whether the hopes expressed on the eve of independence are met or disappointed in contemporary Eritrea.

Gazette of Eritrean Laws Vol. 1/1991 No.1

The promise of equality between men and women made by the EPLF during the revolution was enshrined in the immediate aftermath of independence within the first Gazette of Eritrean Laws Vol. 1/1991 No.1, which proclaimed any laws that discriminate or adversely affect the rights of women as null and void. The Gazette issued laws pertaining to family, land, succession and so on to protect the rights of women. Despite supposedly putting in place such positive policies, the government by and large remains the worst abuser of women's rights. Moreover, in spite of those positive measures, which should have empowered women with equal decision-making rights within the family, underage marriage for girls remains rife, especially in rural areas, in the country; and men still have more than equal say in family issues, especially amongst lower income and less educated families.

The 1994 National Charter of the PFDJ

This Charter was adopted at the EPLF Third Congress in 1994 and provides the ideological guidelines for structuring politics and institutions in independent Eritrea. Moreover, the PFDJ articulated "its vision of Eritrea's future in terms of six basic goals: national harmony, political democracy, economic and social development, social justice (termed 'economic and social democracy'), cultural revival, and regional and international cooperation" (Tronvoll 2009: 50). These overarching goals are meant to be achieved through six main guidelines derived from the experience of the Revolution. These are "national unity, broad based participation by the people, individual dedication of self-sacrifice, the philosophy of social justice, self-reliance, strong relationship between the people and the leadership of the organization" (Tronvoll 2009: 50). Thus, it is within the context of these basic goals, and the overarching guidelines set to realize them that the struggle for gender equality is meant to be pursued. In addition, the PFDJ continued to express in principle its previous political commitments, for instance those made in the NDPs, and promised to

maintain them by assuring women of their equal rights to participate in all fields; and to guarantee them equal pay for equal value of work; and allow them to defend their rights by organizing in unions. Some of these principles such as the right to equal pay for equal value of work might have been implemented in the formal sector, while others have yet to be realized. For instance, there is only one union, the *National Union of Eritrean Women* (NUEW), where women can supposedly organize under to defend their rights. Having one union that literally functions as a mouthpiece of the totalitarian government, in the eyes of most women interested in changing the *status-quo* is not only insufficient but also a huge obstacle. Many women believe the union does not only address the diverse issues that affect them across the spectrum of walks of life, but also think the union is inefficient, lacking sufficient funds, and subservient to the government. This has been echoed by the Committee on the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), which recommended that the “State party [government] expeditiously strengthen the NUEW by providing it with a clear mandate for its functions, as regards gender mainstreaming in all policy areas, and with adequate human and financial resources.”¹⁰

The 1994 Macro Policy

This document promises that the participation of women in education, economic activities and employment will be expanded; while appropriate labor saving technologies will be introduced to reduce the labor of women in the household and reproductive sphere. In particular, this document in its gender clause provides that (1) all efforts will continue to be made to sensitize and enhance the awareness of society about the decisive role of women in the socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation of the country; (2) the equal rights of women will be upheld and all laws that detract from those rights will be changed; (3) the participation of women in education, economic activities, and employment will be expanded; (4) appropriate labor-saving technologies will be introduced to reduce the

¹⁰ See concluding comments of the *Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Eritrea*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/44118344c1.html> (24.12.2012).

drudgery of women in the household and in other activities etc. (Heyde 2001: 3ff). It is imperative to state that most of the gender clause was not new at the time the Macro Policy document was agreed upon. Its provisions were already promised in the aforementioned NDPs. For instance, asked whether there have been any efforts undertaken by the government in carrying out its long promised sensitization programs aimed at improving the awareness of the society about women and gender issues in its media outlets, 'N' (October 2011 int.) responded:

"I have never seen or heard of any discussion being carried out on media. If I get any such possibility, I would use March 8 as an occasion to carry a placard with my demands. Eritrean women are being asked by the PFDJ, through the NUEW, to provide entertainment services (dressing in colorful traditional attire, singing and ululating on occasions found out to be necessary by the Party). We need to stand up and fight for our rights in order to release ourselves from our current situation, where we are literally handcuffed."

'N's perspective is reminiscent of how women were treated by authoritarian regimes in other African countries during second half of the 20th century. For instance, during the tumultuous post-independence transition to and dictatorship eras of Obote's and Amin's in Uganda, where the constitution was suspended, a one party state was declared and political opponents were sent into exile, neither regime and their parties showed any interest in advancing women's rights. On the contrary, parties of both leaders not only failed to challenge the constraints imposed on women's social, economic or political rights from conservative ethnic and religious circles, but also created women's wings through which women party members were expected to provide hostessing services for leaders (Goetz 2002: 552f). Thus, at the dawn the 21st century Eritrean women are finding themselves in a very similar situation to that of Ugandan women during the second half of the 20th century, and the only women's organization that should supposedly stand up against that simply fails to live up to what is expected of it by aligning with the government and forcing women to provide entertainment services, at best.

The Land Proclamation of 1994

According to Proclamation Number 58/1994 the ownership of land is held by the state. However, Eritreans are guaranteed usufruct rights over farming land in equal measure. But they can neither sell nor bequeath it to their children, although children have first option on it after the death of their parents. This proclamation also stipulates that any citizen (woman or man) who fulfills their national duty is entitled to usufruct rights. Right to land is stipulated in Articles 15 and 16, where references are clearly made to “married man, married woman, divorced man, and divorced woman” in order to guarantee the equal rights of women.

Affirmative Action Measures

According to the Quota Project, which is a Global Database of Quotas for Women, today women comprise 19 percent of the members of parliaments around the world. This recent trend to introduce quotas for women’s representation in politics needs to be seen in juxtaposition with the failure of liberal democracy both to incorporate women in positions of decision-making and also its limitations in providing women opportunities to include the representation of their interests in a meaningful way. Thus, in recent years political parties and national legislatures in more than one hundred countries have adopted quotas for the selection of female candidates to political offices (Krook 2006: 304). Around 40 countries have introduced gender quotas in elections to national parliaments, either by amending their constitutions or by changing their electoral laws (legal quotas); and in more than 50 other countries major political parties have voluntarily set out quota provisions in their own parties (Dahlerup 2006: 3). Therefore, the EPLF achieved Eritrea’s independence at a time when institutionalizing quotas to represent as many women as possible in politics was a trend. Thus, it could ill afford not to adopt quotas as an affirmative action measure. Hence, it made its support for the notion clear in Proclamation 86/1996 largely due to the prevailing international pressure in the early 1990s. Eritrea’s longtime political observer in an interview stated, “The UN required its member states to institutionalize it, so Eritrea had no choice but to heed the call” (‘N’ October 2011 int.).

Constitutional Commitments

In February 1994 the Eritrean National Assembly elected a 50-member Constitutional Commission, of which 20 members were women (Heyde 2001: 3ff). These women members participated throughout the course of the writing up process until the finalization of the document, which was ratified by the Constituent Assembly on May 23, 1997. Thus, through their participation their past epic roles during Revolution have been given due reverence within document:

“Noting the fact that the Eritrean women’s heroic participation in the struggle for independence, human rights and solidarity, based on equality and mutual respect, generated by such struggle will serve as an unshakable foundation for our commitment to create a society in which women and men shall interact on the bases of mutual respect, solidarity and equality.”

In addition they have managed to include a specific clause on citizenship rights. Article 3 (1) stipulates that “any person born of an Eritrean father or mother is an Eritrean by birth.” Furthermore the PFDJ’s commitment in principle for gender equality is enshrined in this Constitution. Article 14 (2) guarantees the equality of all persons under the law; and that “no person may be discriminated against on account of race, ethnic origin, language, color, gender, religion, disability, age, political view, or social or economic status or any other improper factors.” The Constitution’s Article 7 (2) states, “Any act that violates the human rights of women or limits or otherwise thwarts their role and participation is prohibited.” PFDJ officials consider the Constitution as one of the most-gender sensitive. This assessment has been echoed by outside researchers who described the document as a “forward-looking constitution” (Campbell 2005: 382). Forward looking to some and gender-sensitive to others it might be; however, there are criticisms as to why the Constitution was not written in a neutral language. Moreover, what needs to be remembered here is that most contemporary states have enshrined in their constitutions some phrases that oppose discrimination on the grounds of sex, religion, or ethnicity. Hence, Eritrea should not be seen as an exception. Instead it needs to be recalled that Eritrea is also amongst the many countries that still have extreme imbalance between the sexes, regardless of what their laws state.

International Commitments

In addition to the Constitution, Eritrea is bound to observe international conventions and treaties to address discrimination against women and protect the rule of law in general. So far Eritrea has ratified several international conventions and human rights treaties to that end. Among those are the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC, acceded August 3, 1994); the CEDAW, acceded September 5, 1995; the *International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights* (2001) and the *International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR, acceded January 23, 2003); the *African Charter on Human and People's Rights* and the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, both ratified in January 1999 (Tronvoll 2009: 35; Amnesty International 2004: 36); and the *Beijing Declaration and Global Platform for Action* (adopted September 15, 1995).

According to the State of Eritrea's and the NUEW's report on the implementation of the *Beijing Platform for Action* (2004: 6), soon after its adoption the CEDAW was subsequently translated into a local language and widely disseminated, particularly among women.¹¹ Furthermore, the report states, "There is strong commitment and political will on the part of the government, which provides for a supportive environment for the implementation of the Convention." However, international researchers and observers evaluate the government's self-assessed strong commitment and goodwill otherwise. For instance (Tronvoll 2009: 35) states: "After independence the Government of Eritrea was not keen enough to ratify international human rights instruments; but it changed its strategy due to the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, in order to use its accession to international instruments as a part of its propaganda war against Ethiopia." This should also, at least, be seen against the fact that Eritrea has not acceded to the two optional protocols to the ICCPR, and also to the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW. Furthermore, even though the government and the

¹¹ The Convention could only have been translated into Tigrinya. However, the CEDAW Committee, although welcoming it "expressed concerns that the provisions of the Convention are not widely known by judges, lawyers and prosecutors. Thus, the Committee calls on the State party [the government] to ensure that the Convention and related domestic legislation are made an integral part of legal education and the training of judicial officers, including judges, lawyers and prosecutors, so as to establish firmly in the country a legal culture supportive of women's equality and non-discrimination."

NUEW claim in their report that there is strong commitment and political will on the side of the government, the Committee on CEDAW raises series issues of concern and reservations with the government's pace in implementing the Convention. In its 2006 concluding comments on Eritrea, the Committee on CEDAW called on the government to "take immediate measures to ensure that the Convention and its provisions are incorporated into national law and become fully applicable in the domestic legal system. As part of its [the government's] current law reform process, to undertake a comprehensive national dialogue on women's rights to equality and non-discrimination and to enshrine in the Constitution, or other appropriate legislation, a definition of equality and discrimination against women, in line with Article 1 of the Convention."¹² Thus, what the Committee is in essence demanding is not only some major strategic issues that need to be addressed by the government to overcome women's subordination, including but not limited to the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the attainment of political equality, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women; but also that the Convention become part of Eritrean law and thus its provisions become enforceable in domestic courts.

An analysis of the post-independence policy of the PFDJ toward women revealed that Eritrea has generic national policies that supposedly support the equal rights of women. However, the same cannot be said about the implementation of these policies. What is happening on the ground is that only a few of these guidelines have been implemented with limited effect. And it is this fact, and lack of evidence to the contrary, that compels interviewees (in particular high-ranking officials) to argue, albeit without evidence, that the government has shown tremendous political will and did all possible in promoting gender equality. But such arguments should not be used as a justification to cover the abundant fiascoes in the nation. In particular, what need not be forgotten are paramount issues such as (1) women have yet to feel the impact of a positive change in the realm of political mobilization, in which they played a greater active part since the second half of the 20th century; (2) the effort to provide childcare services

¹² UN Committee on CEDAW, *Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Eritrea*, February 3, 2006, CEDAW/C/ERI/CO/3, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/44118344c1.html> (11.04. 2012).

has affected only a tiny section of the population and any programs envisaging it exclude the main stakeholder, the government, and rely on the benevolence of employees - despite the fact that government has made repeated promises to deliver on childcare; and (3) even if employment opportunities might have increased since independence in comparison with the pre-independence period, women might have made only limited inroads in the formal sector; while the rest continue to eke out a living as street vendors, small traders or house servants, trapped at the bottom of the income ladder. Moreover, the basis of the PFDJ's theoretical approach to women's emancipation show similarity with those of many socialist states, which adopt Marxist theory, linking gender oppression to class oppression and believing that women's emancipation can only be achieved with the creation of a new, socialist society and with further development of the productive capacity of the economy (Molyneux 1985: 239). Given the absence of freedom to devise an alternative approach one might accept the PFDJ's conceptualization, but even then Eritrea's progress towards achieving them has been uneven and very slow, with some aspects such as women's political participation and representation falling off the agenda.

Representation of Women in Decision-Making Positions

The previous section examined the PFDJ's policy toward women and how it was created and meant to be implemented. Building on that, this section investigates whether the PFDJ has embarked on advancing the political representation of women after independence, based on statistics of women's representation in higher decision-making posts.

As already discussed, some might argue that, irrespective of the wording, Eritrea has a gender-sensitive and progressive constitution and that the government has shown tremendous political will and strong commitment to protecting and advancing women's rights. Others do not only abhor the government's human rights abuses but also argue that, "International and regional human rights treaty safeguards seem to mean nothing in Eritrea, as in practice human rights abuses have been committed by the security forces with total impunity" (Amnesty International 2004: 36). Despite such facts regarding the human rights situation in the country, and the uphill battles that women in general have been facing in their quest for equality; and

despite the fact that Eritrean women did not have a long history of political participation, how did they, then, fare in getting represented in decision-making positions? To answer this question, it is important to examine the representation of women in government as this is one indication of the opportunities given to women. Since persons in government in Eritrea are mostly appointed, the following section discusses how women have fared in being represented by the PFDJ in both higher governmental posts and in international affairs.

In Higher Government Posts

Eritrea is divided into six administrative zones (*zobas*). Currently, only three of the 53 (5.7 percent) sub-regional administrators are women. In the National Assembly composed of seventy-five Central Committee members of the PFDJ, as well as sixty representatives elected from the regional assemblies, with another fifteen representatives elected from the Eritrean diaspora, women make up 22 percent. This percentage of women parliamentarians remained unchanged over the years; while the number of women holding ministerial positions rose to four in 2009 from two in 1998, with “neither being perceived as a major political player” (Campbell 2005: 386). The four women, who are present in the cabinet of 17, hold the positions of Minister of Justice, Labor and Human Welfare, Health, and Tourism. Even now despite their slightly increased number none of them is thought to have any major political clout. The other development that might be considered noteworthy is the appointment of a woman governor,¹³ six director generals and fifty-eight directors, which did not exist in both 1998 and 2002. However, compared to the number of men holding equivalent positions, these numbers are trivial. What can be concluded from this is that there exists huge gender disparity in higher governmental posts. This shows that implementation of the supposedly gender favorable policies is stalled not only because of socio-cultural barriers but also because of the PFDJ’s unwillingness to appoint more women. This challenges the PFDJ’s supposed strong will and commitment to empower women politically. Thus, it would make sense for the PFDJ to openly acknowledge it has not

¹³ Currently (2013), Eritrea has only one woman governor.

confronted the struggle for women's liberation and gender equality with the same courage that it did during the Revolution.

In International Affairs

The overall statistics of women represented in international affairs shows a slight increase over the years. In 1998 there were only 7 women represented and that number reached 14 in 2009. However, a closer analysis of this data clearly demonstrates that the top echelons of the Foreign Ministry and its foreign missions abroad are still occupied by men; although two female director generals were appointed in 2009, for the first time in the Ministry's history. The number of women directors rose to three in 2009 from two in 2006. There are two unsubstantiated reasons put forward for the lack of significant change in the number of women appointed to undertake international affairs jobs. Firstly, it has been argued that there are not many women who have acquired qualifications or the necessary experience in the field of international relations to undertake jobs related to international affairs. Now, the question that deserves examination is why women are not acquiring qualification and experience in international relations.

Preliminary research carried out by Habtemariam and Andemariam (2003: 23) provides an insight to the situation. The research found out that 91 percent of the young University of Asmara female students thought a woman has to get married before the age of 30. Thus, this means women are not only expected to get married before the age of 30 but also develop the necessary qualification and experience within that period of time; otherwise they risk being looked down on for presumably not having the right "qualification" to undertake international affairs and political jobs. The crux of the matter is not only to be found in how far the PDFJ goes to address that issue but also in how far Eritrean society has progressed in bringing about change in its perceptions of women's roles in the society. Some argue that the Revolution had a huge impact in changing the perception of the society; while realists see the Revolution as perhaps triggering a positive change, which was not followed upon after independence by the PFDJ.

Secondly, it has been stated, albeit often unofficially, that women have different priorities and that even qualified women would forgo waiting long in the line for less paid political positions in favor of other better paid jobs outside the public service. Now, at the outset what is important to

recall is the fact that it is the PFDJ and not voters who determines the composition of the Foreign Ministry personnel and persons appointed in Foreign Service. In this context, the first reason that there is a shortage of qualified women in Eritrea for such undertaking does not hold true entirely. To begin with there is no public evidence on whether women are offered positions but declined them. Even if it might be the case that fewer “politically experienced and qualified” women come forward for positions in the Foreign Ministry, which is the supply side of the equation; it is not even informally mentioned the fact that selectors within the PFDJ do not only discriminate against such women potential aspirants but also hardly choose in proportion from the pool of women that are available. Moreover, and this perspective is hardly discussed given the totalitarian political climate in the country; even those women who are aware that there is systematic discrimination against them at the highest levels will never put forward their concerns directly to those responsible for fear of reprisals. This should be understandable enough in a country where the right to freedom of speech and expression is recognized in the Constitution Article 19 (2) but has never been allowed in practice; and it can have dire consequences if any such constitutional right is invoked to criticize the PFDJ.

Even though one takes the official argument at a face value accepting that there are not enough qualified women, evidently the question that should follow is what needs to be done in order to have more qualified women as political aspirants; albeit this contradicts the reality in the country that it is not merit that counts rather loyalty to the PFDJ. This outlook of the author, however, is opposed by ‘N’ in an interview (October 2011), who argued:

“Loyalty or merit there are a lot of women who are more loyal than men to the PFDJ. But those women are not wanted to be in the system. Educated women are not needed.”

This observation suggests that the government, which bestowed in itself all rights, is not ready to give up some of these rights. Equally women who feel marginalized have to thrust and push at a great risk for an enabling environment, which does not exist at the moment.

In Regional Assemblies

The first local (then called provincial) elections were held in 1992, where women scored an average of 16 percent representation. According to Wolde-georgis (2004: 23f)¹⁴ these elections were considered as a positive experience given that women for the first time exercised their political rights to vote and be elected in a society that had no such prior experience. It is, however, important to note that international observers do not consider these elections as formal simply because they did not fulfill the criteria that would have qualified them as such. In these transitional elections, Tronvoll (2009: 48f) states, "Political parties were prohibited and individual candidates were not allowed to communicate any political program or platform to their constituency. Furthermore, there were no secret ballots and the EPLF changed the 'electoral procedures' during the process due to a lot of confusion on registration/nomination of candidates." The prohibition of candidates from communicating their political programs and the lack of platform to discuss with the electorate issues considered paramount would be the hallmark of the elections that followed. These transitional elections, thus, certainly left negative antecedence. And these constraints should have been fought off as early as possible; but unfortunately, the majority of the electorate was ecstatic by the euphoria of independence and failed to understand the impact of such constraints on future elections. And those that might have understood the negative effects could have been prohibited from participating in the transitional elections, as political parties were not allowed to contest the elections. Before examining the results of the two other regional elections that followed the 1992 provincial elections, it is imperative to discuss the election procedures and the electoral system employed in these elections.

According to Tronvoll (2009: 53) the mandate of the 1997 elections was not properly communicated to voters, who believed that ballot was to elect regional assembly members. In fact, the vote had a threefold mandate. First, electing candidates for regional (*zoba*) assemblies; secondly, electing candidates for the Constituent Assembly; and thirdly, electing members for the National Assembly (Tronvoll 2009: 53). As if this is not confusing already, a parallel election was held with a separate ballot for female

¹⁴ Unofficial translation from the original in Tigrinya done by the author.

representatives. Therefore, a double ballot was used instead of a single one, whereby one was used to fill the reserved seats for women with a pink ballot paper, and another one for open seats with a blue ballot paper (Tronvoll 2009: 54). Moreover, it becomes even more difficult to discuss women's issues in general, let alone to press for the inclusion of specific women's rights, in the absence of platforms where political agendas of candidates could be discussed. The electoral system employed was a multiple-member constituency with a majority vote; and within this system the election for reserved seats was delimited differently from that of an open one, where female representatives in the reserved seats had an electorate of between 8,000 and 10,000 people, whereas those in the open election had an electorate of approximately 4,000 to 5,000 people in the *Maekel Zoba* (Tronvoll 2009: 54). In addition, in response to the 1992 provincial elections, candidates were given only five days of campaigning to display their posters showing their photos, express their background and experience, and state what they recognized as political issues, which were in line with the government's development policy (Tronvoll 2009: 54).

In the 2004 *Zoba* assembly elections women received an average of 28 percent representation; with the highest presence being scored in the Central (*Ma'ekel*) *zoba* at 34 percent; and the lowest being 24 percent in the *Anseba zoba*. This shows a decrease of around five numbers in comparison with that of 1997 in both *zobas*. In addition, in all the *zobas*, the number of women elected in 2004 as parliamentarians showed a slight decrease from that of 1997. Moreover, in 1997 a near majority of the women who made it to the *zoba* assemblies in all the six *zobas* were elected through quota, by competing amongst themselves, while only eight of them were elected in an open competition against men. This number dwindled to seven in the 2004 elections.¹⁵

Thus far, the descriptive analysis of the political representation of women demonstrated the huge disparity in the number of women and men holding political (appointed or elected) posts. Clearly the gap between intention (policies) and realization (implementation) is wide. But it is also fundamentally important to move beyond descriptive analysis and examine the injustices of such a situation. Why are women under-represented in

¹⁵ Data analyzed here is gathered from Wolde-georgis (2004), and the NUEW 30th Anniversary Conference Papers of 2009.

political power and decision-making positions in Eritrea; and why should they be represented in any greater number than they are now? Therefore, it is crucial to examine the seven hypotheses that have been developed to explain the female political under-representation in general and by contextualizing them vis-à-vis the Eritrean context, in particular.

The Deficit Hypothesis

This notion emanates from the perception that women are less interested in politics than men, and consequently under-represented in the political sphere. Squires (2008: 196) argues, "If women are more undecided, less interested and less knowledgeable about parliamentary politics than men, this could be read not as failing, but as positive statement of disillusionment and discontent. Women find the current form of party politics particularly unappealing, since it fails to represent their concerns or priorities." This is particularly true in poor and developing countries where issues that mainly affect women and their perspectives are either relegated or marginalized. Does this hypothesis also hold true in Eritrea? Although the premise still needs to be substantiated, many people (ordinary and officials alike) ostensibly believe, and want others to accept as factual, that women in Eritrea too are less interested in politics. However, the truth is that the current totalitarian system of politics is found to be less and less responsive and accommodating of the challenges that women face in their daily lives.

The Electorate's Decision

The second premise asserts that it is the electorate's decision why women continue to be under-represented. Voters, in general and female voters who hold conservative gender images, in particular, do not vote women into political positions is the premise behind the electorate's decision. The NUEW (2008: 19) affirms that this hypothesis holds true in the case of Eritrea. The two main reasons for this, according to the NUEW, are: first, some women are concerned that if they vote for aspiring political women, they might be hampering their caring roles. Others believe that the public sphere is not best performed and served by women and thus, they prefer to vote for men. The NUEW does little to fight against such arguments that stem from wrong perceptions. In addition, this also needs to be seen against

the repeated promises made by the EPLF/PFDJ to undertake all the necessary efforts to sensitize and enhance the awareness of the society about the decisive role that women play in the socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation of the country; and hence address any obstacles that they might face. But the sensitization programs so far focused on cultural transformation, whose implicit messages either send the signal that entrenches the traditional roles of women or that women aspiring for public roles could try if they are capable of juggling both private and public life on their own. Such messages are hardly sensitizing the society to either see or accept the concept of a political woman in positive light.

The Social Structural Theory

The Social Structure Theory is the third theory that states the division of labor prevents women from becoming successful in politics. This, certainly, is true. The division of labor does not only prevent women from becoming successful in politics but also forces them to undertake all the low-paid and unpaid jobs necessary for the reproduction of daily life and the running of the society as it exists today. Then, how does this argument apply in Eritrea? If representative democracy failed to find a satisfactory solution to this quandary, then the totalitarian system that exists in Eritrea is nowhere even near to address it either. Traditionally girls and women are not supposed to dream of, let alone have, a public (political) job in Eritrea. In traditional Eritrea, it is shame for a man to stay at home while a woman is being elected in a people's assembly; and in contemporary Eritrea, "entering politics for some women is [tantamount] to calling an end to their marriage relationship" (NUEW 2008: 19).

The Political Structure

The fourth proposition focuses on the political structure. It supposes that state institutions and their mechanisms of representation such as the electoral system, the political culture, and media are institutionally masculine. As a result of this women are being systematically excluded from successfully running for elected office. The fact that state institutions in Eritrea are typically masculine has been clear to any observer of Eritrean political institutions and political discourses. Moreover, the fact that the

higher echelons of the Eritrean government are dominated by men reveals that institutional masculinity is largely at work in Eritrea.

Political Parties as Gatekeepers

The fifth theory, political parties as gatekeepers, postulates that the problem of the under-representation of women is not the lack of “supply” of women but a problem of “demand” for women. Lovenduski (2000: 94) states parties do not select and recruit women as candidates for election in their known availability. The sole governing political party in Eritrea is the PFDJ; data on both appointed and elected positions showed that the PFDJ is in practice no different from the other parties (in democratic countries or otherwise) when it comes to recruiting women as candidates for elections. Although some might argue that as long as no genuine elections have taken place, this cannot be substantiated. But it needs to be remembered that it is, undoubtedly, less complicated for sole governing parties, in the absence of competing political parties, to appoint or put women in favorable slates for election. Despite its mantra of portraying itself as a women-friendly, the PFDJ and its top officials have shown more than a fair dose of misogyny by their deeds; and it is obvious that the PFDJ needs to do more than it did so far if it is genuinely interested in narrowing the apparent gender gap that prevails in the country.

Direct Discrimination Proposition

Lovenduski (2000: 87) asserts “research findings on women and democratic politics in Western Europe demonstrate that women are not only under-represented in decision-making positions but also there is pervasive male resistance to women’s presence amongst political elites.” In other words, this means that men politicians do not only discriminate against women politicians but also disparage their very presence in parliament houses. This, for instance, happened in the UK, where a study by researchers from Birkbeck College found out that, “Male MPs pretended to juggle imaginary breasts and jeered ‘melons’ as women made Commons speeches.”¹⁶ How about in Eritrea? In Eritrea this notion of direct discrimination, male

¹⁶ See the BBC’s report titled “Women MPs endure sexist taunts,” December 7, 2004, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4074877.stm (04.04.2012).

bonding, and resistance to women's inclusion in political positions takes many forms. The NUEW (2008: 19) claims that, "Some have the perception that the public sphere [politics] is an intriguing male job and as long as women have secure paid job, they should not add much fatigue and jeopardize their stable family life." Although Eritrean women parliamentarians have yet to experience the kind of mockery that women members of parliaments in other regions of the world face in practice, partly due to the absence of a democratic political climate in the country, the direct discrimination that they endure comes informally from men under the guise of "good Samaritans." Those "good Samaritans" campaign that for their own good women should stay at home and that men should have a monopoly over the hurly-burly world of politics. In so doing they make women believe that it is for their good, and not because men are resisting their presence in the political arena.

Indirect Discrimination Theory

The Indirect Discrimination Theory focuses on gender images and in particular on images of female politicians as less capable than men in political leadership. In Eritrea this has often been expressed as women's lack of confidence. The NUEW (2008: 19) states that, "Even for those enlightened women it takes considerable time to overcome their inferiority complex, emanating from the perception that male parliamentarians are better acquainted with politics." Therefore, women are reluctant to contemplate, let alone work, in the male-dominated political arena of the country is the conclusion of the NUEW. But if women had no exposure due to the oppressive system and culture that prevailed in Eritrea until liberation, then it is just naïve to expect them to fit in the system instantly.

The Need for Equal Political Representation of Women in Eritrea

The unequal political representation of women can be explained through a combination of the aforementioned theories, but why should there be more representation of women in political institutions; or in this particular case, why should there be more representation of women in both appointed and elective political positions in Eritrea? There are four theoretical arguments

invoked for the equal representation of women in formal politics. These are (1) the arguments about role models; (2) the notion concerning justice; (3) the assertion regarding women's interests; (4) and the claim for the revitalization of democracy (Phillips 1995: 62f, Phillips 1998: 229ff).

(1) The Role Models Argument

Squires (2008: 204) states that the role models argument "is based on the belief that the existence of women representatives will encourage others to gain the confidence that they too can aspire to this role." Put simply, "This means the more women role models are brought into positions of political leadership, the more others will be aspired to follow on their footsteps." This model could be described as a road map to demographic representation rather than substantive one, at best. Despite that, this notion has repeatedly been invoked in Eritrea for increasing the political representation of women, albeit without seeking to examine what is needed for more women politicians to be represented in an environment where decisions are vested in the hands of one man in most cases. Thus far, it has been clear that those who have climbed to the echelons of political power by supposedly breaking barriers have proven not to hold any political power, as mentioned earlier. Yet, interviewees (mostly officials) argue that using such a model involving successful women models will be helpful in dislodging deep-rooted assumptions about what women should and should not do. This strategy is in the end expected to bring about an increased self-esteem for aspiring young women politicians. Not many would deny the idea that role models with an experience of breaking barriers of all sorts might have considerable impact in dislodging deep-rooted negative assumptions about women's roles in society. In the past, in particular during the Revolution era, this strategy might have served well. However, today's role models in Eritrea are not only required, and expected, to break barriers through being equal comrades-in-arms with their male counterparts as in the past, but also prove that they are equals in practical terms. They have to influence people around them, clearly articulate their opinions on diverse issues that concern not only women but also the entire society, be capable in drafting policies, and if need be, defend their principles, among other things. However, it is important to note that this ability to influence and articulate comes with education and real experience

in the political world. Thus far, there are not many steps taken to talk big about providing these opportunities for women politicians in the country. Due to the lack of a democratic political atmosphere, this might neither be uttered nor discussed inside the country, but foreign researchers have already made a clear note of it.

Moreover, the problem with invoking this model is that to begin with it is assumed that women in Eritrea lack self-esteem to participate in politics. This is symptomatic of the situation in the country whereby rather than focusing on real causes of problems side issues are insinuated for cover up. It should rather be argued women are not actively participating in politics not because of lack of self-esteem but rather because they found the current politics in the country unappealing to them.

(2) The Notion Concerning Justice

According to Phillips (1995: 63), "The most compelling argument of all is the principle of justice between the sexes." And, that she adds, "It is disturbingly unfair for men to monopolize political representation." The author could not express it better, and completely agrees with Phillips that it is certainly unfair for any system that preaches about social justice not to take any major steps to put it into practice. The Eritrean Revolution was a revolution whose professed principles were social justice and gender equality. To believe in social justice first and foremost requires the elimination of discrimination of any sort. The under-representation of women in decision-making posts in Eritrea demonstrates that it is not only unfair for men to monopolize political power but also a default on the promises of the Revolution. Also Squires (2008: 205) argues both role model and justice arguments relate to positions of just distribution of social resources, where political positions are considered to be one of these; and therefore, need to be distributed equally. The presence of unequal distribution of these positions of influence shows that there are structural barriers preventing social groups from having access to these scarce resources. In Eritrea, the excuses for such an unequal distribution of positions of political influence are often alleged to include the weight of tradition, poverty, and absence of women political enthusiasts, just to mention a few. These might sound compelling arguments on the surface.

However, the real substantive reasons can be located somewhere else, such as the status of women in the sexual division of labor, and the inequitable and unnatural arrangement in sharing resources etcetera, which the public debate on gender, if it exists at all, has yet to grapple with.

(3) The Assertion Regarding Women's Interests

The argument for women's interests is a pragmatic one, and focuses directly on the political process. It is based on the notion that "women occupy a distinct position within the society and share common experiences that gives them specific needs and interests. These needs and interests peculiar of women will be better represented by other women" (Squires 2008: 205). In other words, it is claimed that women have distinct and separate interests and that these interests cannot be adequately represented by men; and that the election of women ensures their representation (Phillips 1998: 234). This claim is contentious among feminists, as the trajectories in the history of feminism show that there have been constant moves from the strategies of equality to difference and currently to diversity. In particular, it is problematic to argue so in the context of Eritrea, where discussions on whether any social group, for that matter women, have separate interests aside from what has been prescribed, in the name of national unity, by the PFDJ. So, the author leaves this aside as it has no purchase on the current political situation in Eritrea.

(4) The Claim for the Revitalization of Democracy

This notion also focuses directly on the political process and asserts that women have different relationship to politics and their presence will enhance the quality of the political life, which neither the normative nor the pragmatic arguments claim to bring about, and more importantly enthusiastic supporters of this argument speak from a difference perspective arguing that political institutions are masculine in construction and operation, and that the presence of women will change their character (Lovenduski 2000: 88). According to Lovenduski (2000: 89) the difference argument assumes that there is a need for change and an objective for electing women is to secure that change. And the changes that can be expected as a result of electing women are categorized into four, with the

first being procedural/institutional. This refers to methods and processes that would be undertaken to modify the nature of an institution in order to make it more woman-friendly. This involves instilling cultural change making legislatures gender aware, which also needs to be accompanied by procedural change to incorporate women members. The second change refers to impact, where the effects of changing the balance between men and women need to be exhibited in terms of legislation and policy outputs. This includes not only making women's issues part of the agenda, but also making sure that all legislation is woman-friendly or gender-sensitive. The third change that can be anticipated is representation change, which includes specific measures and actions to secure women's continued and enhanced access to legislature, including encouragement of women candidates, the explicit use of women role models, the promotion of sex equality legislation, and action to place women in important political positions. Finally, a change in discourse, which is both internal and external to political institutions, can be expected as a result of electing women. This includes not only efforts that will be made to alter parliamentary language in order to make women's perspectives normalize, but also the use of platforms to alter public opinion to accept political woman as a normal concept as that of political man (Lovenduski 2000: 89). Could those changes be anticipated in Eritrea? At the moment, it is very unlikely given that the election of women is not meant to facilitate these changes rather for them to learn how to vote, and in essence nothing beyond that. Furthermore, the argument for increasing the number of female representatives is based on the belief that such representatives will not only change the masculine nature of political institutions by their very presence but also by practically participating in the political process differently, operating across party lines to establish alliances demanding for improvements such as in childcare provisions or changes in abortion laws (Phillips 1998: 237). Undoubtedly, this also is an interesting argument. However, to contemplate how this argument would have applied to women in Eritrean politics requires the presence of seasoned women politicians working across party lines in dealing with issues that matter to women, in particular, and society, in general. Currently, there are neither experienced women politicians nor even political parties other than the PFDJ, let along the habit of working across party lines in the political affairs of the country.

Conclusion

This article found that the PFDJ's claims to legitimacy, particularly amongst Eritrea's female population, are bound up in various national policies that purportedly support strong gender equity perspectives. However, there is a wide gap between the ambitions and aspirations set out by such policies and the ability to implement them and improve the lives of women in the society. Many informed women agree that it is not for lack of policies or the policies themselves that is at the heart of the issue, although some of the policies can still be criticized for their generic nature, but a chronic lack of enforcing mechanisms that continues to hinder progress towards the advancement of women's social, economic and political rights in Eritrea. There is a felt need amongst women in Eritrea that the time has come for the government to move beyond rhetorical promises of social justice and gender equality and to begin to enforce the laws and policies that have been enacted. Some might argue that having four women in a cabinet of 17 ministers is a good start. But it is important to recall that, two decades after independence, it is time to consolidate the gains made and demand more. If this is not sufficiently compelling an argument for change, one only has to look at the current plight of women in Eritrean society who continue to be disempowered and subordinated as long as no action is taken. Women still occupy the bottom levels of the socio-economic ladder and there have been very few who have been able to break the glass ceiling that separates them from the seats of power and many who have been relegated to such occupations as clerks, secretaries, and serving tea in order to make ends meet. Moreover, the current political representation and participation of women is limited not only by the lack of political freedoms in the country in general, but also by the government's unwillingness to address the constraining issues that women face. Beyond putting in place generic laws that supposedly support the participation of women in all spheres, the government has yet to implement these laws or even tackle the limiting factors that women face both in private and public life.

In addition, the government claims to believe in and commit itself to the principles of social justice and gender equality. However, 21 years after independence it has yet to achieve gender parity in the higher organs of political power. Although it utterly failed to bring about parity between women and men in higher decision-making political positions, it would not

criticize itself on its failures. While the government might be proud of its ex-women fighters, and even perhaps its civilian women, for their contribution during the Revolution and in the nation-building process, it has been very slow to create an enabling environment and implement the necessary policies that would allow them access into its decision-making bodies. Thus, the challenges that women face in the political front are not only related to their country's backward tradition or underdevelopment but equally to the totalitarian political system that has been curtailing their rights at every level.

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