It’s our turn to rule: the 30% gender quota campaign in Sierra Leone

Executive Summary

The 11-year civil war (1991-2002) in Sierra Leone was a turning point for gender activism and marked the formation of a strong women’s movement whose fight for peace and democracy in the public-political arena changed the nature and course of the peace process and, more generally, that of politics in Sierra Leone. Once peace was achieved, however, women were once again marginalized and expected to return to the private sphere. Nevertheless, they continued to advocate for the increased participation of women in political and governance processes and for addressing the cultural and traditional practices that suppress, subordinate, and hinder women’s effective participation in these processes.

Since the war’s end, reconstruction efforts have, to some extent, created a space for political engagement of traditionally marginalized groups including women. The 30% quota campaign, promoted by the Women’s Solidarity Support Group (WSSG), a coalition of women’s groups which seeks to ensure a 30% constitutionally-mandated quota system to increase the number of women in public office, is one in a series of efforts aimed at building an equality agenda in post-war Sierra Leone.

This paper, based on interviews conducted in Sierra Leone in March and April 2010, examines women’s engagement with political processes, in particular, the WSSG’s evoking of international and national instruments to advocate for the 30% quota system. In so doing, the paper addresses the following questions: how effective are the strategies employed by the WSSG in their campaign; what are the prevailing discourses around the issue of gender quotas in Sierra Leone; how aware are people of the campaign and how much do they support it; and, can a quota system change unequal power relations in Sierra Leone?

After independence in 1961, women became members of the Sierra Leone Parliament mainly through presidential appointments. By 1995 there were only 4 women in a parliament of 114. The country had had three democratic elections since 1996, but this has not translated into a significant change in women’s representation. The 1996 elections, conducted while the war still waged in parts of the country, marked the transition from military to civilian rule. Arguably, these elections were the first opportunity to increase women’s numerical representation in parliament because, unlike previous elections, these were conducted using a proportional representation national list (PRNL) electoral system. What a PR system meant for Sierra Leonean women is that, with the requisite political will, parties could promote women’s advancement by placing them high on a list used to rank their preferred candidates, in effect, ensuring the success of these women. Notwithstanding this, only 5 females were elected in that
campaign. The elections of 2002, also conducted within a PR electoral system, resulted in the country’s first female presidential candidate and 18 elected female members in a parliament of 124. In 2007, the country reverted to the First Past the Post electoral system which saw only 16 women winning seats in a parliament of 124. The inability of women to make a significant dent in these elections indicates that, among other things, political parties, party leaders and electoral systems determine who gets nominated for public office and are the major determinants of the notable presence or absence of women in national legislatures. More importantly, it suggests that greater legislative representation of women resides in the political will of the parties, particularly in their willingness to nominate more women and place them in winnable positions on their list.

The lack of political will manifested in these elections became the driving force behind the campaign for a 30% constitutionally-mandated gender quota, a quota that would result in: 14 seats being reserved for women at the district level (the country is divided into 14 districts); 50% of reserved chiefs seats in Parliament being allocated to the district’s female chiefs and women in traditional leadership, by rotation (currently 12 seats are reserved for paramount chiefs); and, 20% of ‘winnable’ seats being reserved for women by political parties.

An analysis of the 30% quota campaign suggests it has little chance of succeeding: Sierra Leone is constantly grappling with democratic governance and sustainability; it has an elite male cadre that has resisted women’s full and equal participation in the public sphere; the women’s movement is fragmented, there is a lack of funds to sustain such a campaign and the required expertise to engage the state and political elites; the 30% gender quota campaign has unwittingly focused on a female rather than a feminist presence and on centering women’s representation in parliament rather than in all decision-making positions.

A quota system is neither a panacea for equal representation nor does it address the critical issue of unequal power relations. The struggle for gender parity in politics and public life cannot, and should not, end with the implementation of a quota because increasing women’s participation numerically is a necessary, but insufficient condition for women’s full, equal and informed participation in political, social and economic decision-making processes. Attaining a critical mass can only be achieved through empowering female legislators and women in other decision-making positions with the tools to understand how these institutions work, how and why it is important to adopt a gender lens, and how they can come to see themselves as legitimate political actors. This can be done by building a feminist consciousness, but without necessarily expecting women to identify themselves as feminists in a society in which even the most vocal gender activists refuse to do so.