

South Africa: On Queens Who Would be Kings

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Recent years have witnessed increasing incidents of women politicians compromising their accountability to the women of South Africa, and to democratic and transformative processes in general. Alarmingly, many of these politicians have been key figures in past struggles for social justice, democracy and gender transformation. While we must hold our politicians accountable, an emphasis on moral condemnation does not take us very far in understanding why we are making so little democratic progress, and what the real sources of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa are. A more productive way of explaining the fierce ambition among women in the state is an understanding of the class and gendered character of post-apartheid state formation. In confronting this, we see that institutional cultures powerfully shape individual women's involvement in politics and the evolution of gender initiatives.

So what goes wrong?

In South Africa during the 80s, a robust struggle for gender equality waged by women's organisations seemed to augur well for rapid and systematic gender transformation and democratisation in the post-apartheid period. By 1994, the ground had been laid for systematically confronting gender injustices and mobilising the role of women within the state to drive changes for justice and equity. Both national machinery and the increase in women's political participation have been seen as central routes for gender transformation throughout Africa. Yet national machinery has offered extremely limited scope for transformation. The numerical increase in women's political participation has also had dubious effects. But when we express outrage or disappointment about the failure of either to deliver, we ignore the complex role of the state in reproducing power and capital accumulation among groups and individuals. We assume that moral, and not political and institutional factors are of primary importance in explaining what goes wrong, and how to explore alternatives. When leadership and institutional cultures come to reflect the state's role as an instrument for elite consolidation, women's potential as transformative agents is severely compromised. Many women position themselves conservatively in response to the state's new ruling function. Moreover, mechanisms set up to promote gendersensitive, democratic and bottomup governance, will increasingly be dominated by a state culture of competition and elite consolidation. Often, therefore, women politicians and gender machinery operate within the context of politics that is fiercely authoritarian, cut-throat, top-down and patriarchal. In this context, many women choose to become defenders and proponents of the status quo to protect their class interests and political power. To as great a degree as men, women within the state bureaucracy act in accordance with class logic. They became ruthless defenders of the status quo and operate in ways that protect their power and authority.

Baleka Mbete, former Speaker of the House, ANC National Chairperson, and part of the leadership of the ANC Women's League has been accused of opportunism and ruthless ambition. Many critics of women politicians such as Baleke Mbete dwell on the moral frailties of individuals. As an activist, Mbete's track record of championing democracy, especially justice for women, is impressive. However, as a politician in recent years, Mbete's commitment to oversight, accountability and transformation has been criticised, and some have accused her of cover-ups within the ANC and

government in her role as Parliamentary Speaker of the House. Most notable are her comments in parliament's Travelgate saga, where she was slammed for accusing the Scorpions Travelgate investigation of 'wrongful persecution' of members. Many felt this public statement inappropriate for the position she held. Mbete herself was accused in the Travelgate saga. But can we explain her political behaviour simply in terms of individual moral failings or personal ambition?

Not only do state feminists act in accordance with class logic. Their behaviour is often deeply gendered. Women within the state will vigorously endorse patriarchal leadership styles in existing post-apartheid political battles around the survival of the fittest. This explains the ferociousness with which many of our women leaders have sanctioned the patriarchal functioning of the state. It also explains their fierce drive for power, what is often seen as the 'unbecoming' greed, or the 'unprincipled' competitiveness of our women politicians. Patriarchal behaviour, as we have seen all too clearly in recent years, coexists very easily with women's biological status; mimicking socially dominant behaviour guarantees routes to capitalist advancement and authoritarian empowerment.

The conservative effects of women politicians' roles within the state are compounded by the depoliticising of discourses around gender. Today, gender machinery and discourses amount simply to a technocratic process for redress and equality. There is a huge industry around number counting, setting up of instruments and mechanisms, and research, but very little actual transformation. This reflects the absurdity of the state - as an institution committed to reproducing power - being charged with transformation, as opposed to civil society organisations playing a central role in engaging state institutions.

State control over gender has also involved the right-wing transformation of formerly robust women's movements. The demobilising of women's movements has been well-illustrated throughout Africa. In countries including Ghana, Kenya and Zimbabwe, dominant parties have increased their control over women's wings, so that, like the ANC Women's League, they end up being little more than rubber-stamping bodies for government. Mbete, Secretary General of the ANC between 1991 and 1993, has carefully been redefining her political priorities in the same way that the Women's League has.

This clearly reveals the slavish support of many women for masculinist domination. But it also reveals the logic of class action and consolidation. Social actors, both male and female, strategically position themselves in patron-client networks. And this repositioning involves a complete redefinition of the goals of organisations that previously mobilised women to eradicate all injustice, and not to ensure elite privileges.

The co-opting or repositioning of women's movements, as well as the conservatism of femocrats, and gender mainstreaming, are crucially connected to the growth of the postcolonial state as a site of violent and ruthless accumulation. This function makes it increasingly authoritarian and hostile to democratic participation. It also makes leadership fiercely opportunistic and aggressive, and leads both women and men leaders and politicians to create allegiances that signal their compliance, and that therefore guarantee their security.

The legacy of primitive accumulation within African state apparatuses is well-illustrated in contexts such as Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe, where threatened elites have fiercely battled to maintain control over the state apparatus as their only source of power. Echoes of such battles have become increasingly evident in South Africa. Political leadership vividly reflects feudalistic battles for economic and political power, autocratic forms of leadership and entitlement.

This poses huge challenges for feminism and for progressive women. State control over gender has also involved the right-wing transformation of formerly robust women's movements in governance.

Feminist leadership involves deliberative and servant leadership, democratic leadership that engages people in true dialogue. Feminist leadership would therefore mean a radical challenge to the state as a site of authoritarian control and elite consolidation. For women to make a true difference as political leaders they would need to take a stand against class and power injustices at the same time that they confront the patriarchy of the state.

But even more important is how societal autonomy can sustain struggles for gender and social change. Women's organisations, civil society organisations, non-government organisations and radical individuals who operate independently of the state have the independence and political scope to challenge power and injustice in radical ways. This autonomy guarantees freedom from the overwhelming ties of loyalty, patronage and dependency that so easily compromise even the most principled of politicians. Such autonomy also guarantees that we focus on generating transformative politics, rather than on monitoring the mere presence of women in power. In fact, the compliance of women leaders like Mbete within the status quo is a sobering lesson for feminists or gender activists. It is evidence of how perniciously patriarchal ideology takes hold. It also speaks to the urgency to build supportive feminist cultures and movements in the post-apartheid period, and for us to re-mobilise our energies as politically active citizens.

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P.S.

* From Amandla! website.

<http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/special-features/sa-national-womens-day/597-on-queens-who-would-be-kings>