

A Golden Age for Women's Participation in Ghana?

By- Mawuli Dakeⁱ

Despite the abysmal parliamentary performance of women in the 2008 elections, the new political dispensation in Ghana today reflects an encouraging trend for women's political participation. Today two of the top four Chief Ranking members of State are women- Ms. Joyce Bamford-Addo and Ms. Georgina T. Wood as Speaker of Parliament and Chief Justice of Ghana respectively. For the first time, women have also been appointed for other crucial positions such as Inspector General of Police and Attorney General among others. Even though this reflects nothing near the proportional representation women deserve, it is nevertheless, an unprecedented opportune moment to ensure even greater participation of women in decision making, as Ghana's new President John Atta-Mills fills leadership positions at various levels across the country.

This paper is a comparative commentary on the situation of women's political leadership in Ghana to highlight our progress, draw attention to areas of retrogression and propose some immediate strategies for greater representation of women in our political leadership.

Times of Change in government and subsequent appointments by the winning administration, offer the most opportune moments for transformational changes in political leadership. These moments can also retard progress or reverse previous gains in many areas including the area of gender balance. The disappointing numbers from the election outcome for women candidates itself should not prevent us from advancing women's involvement in our government. One man, in the person of the President has the singular power to make many of these appointments and he can choose to use this discretion in a fair manner that ensures greater gender balance in his appointments. And what a golden opportunity it would be for women in particular and Ghana as a whole. The exciting moment in Ghana today can mark the beginning of that golden age.

Women at the Presidential level

Even though none of eight presidential tickets had a woman on the top the ticket, there were three historic female vice-presidential candidates in the 2008 elections. These female running-mates included Ms. Patience Amesimeku for the Democratic Freedom Party (DFP); Ms. Petra Maria Amegashie, for Ghana People's National Convention (PNC) and Ms. Rosemond Abraham, for the Reformed Patriotic Democrat (RPD). Though the performance of the parties they represented was close to insignificant in the elections, their selection and role in the electioneering period, nevertheless, was a positive stepping stone for future female candidates at the presidential level.

The relatively positive reception the women candidates enjoyed is a good indication that the vast majority of Ghanaians are ready for a woman President if the right candidates are presented. Opinion polls prior to the elections support this, as overwhelming number of citizens- both men and women not only say they are ready for a woman president, but readily point out qualified women they would like to see in such a position. The likes of Mrs. Betty Mould-Iddrisu, Emma Mitchel, Joyce Aryee etc are regularly suggested as women they would like to see as President. Anyone who knows the caliber of these women would concur that the lack of qualified women cannot be an excuse for any of our parties.

Ministerial appointments

A 2003 study on women's leadership in Ghana- Dake and Herlands report, showed that at the time, women occupied 13% of overall Ministerial and Deputy Ministerial positions under the first Kufour government. Under Kufour's second term, 4 out of 25- representing 16% of substantive Ministers of States were women. Today, 6 out of 25 i.e 24% ministerial nominations under the new administration are women. Though a great improvement from previous situation, it is still not near an equitable representation of women. Another area of positive change is the higher number of Ministries headed by women in the previous administrations compared to today. Ministries headed by women in the last Kufour administration included Ministries of Fisheries; Women and Children's Affairs; Lands, Forestry and Mines; and Tourism and Diasporan Relations. Compared to today's appointments, women occupy the Ministries of Justice and Attorney-General; Information; Trade and Industry; Environment, Science and Technology; Women and Children's Affairs; and Ministry of Tourism. These appointments include some new high-powered faces such as nominees Zita Okaikwei and Betty Mould Iddrisu. However, only one female out of ten has been appointed to as a Regional Minister. While this is a slight improvement, compared to zero in the last administration, it remains a matter to be addressed.

Parliamentary representation

The historic election of Mrs Joyce Bamford-Addo as the first ever female Speaker of the Parliament of Ghana is a laudable achievement for women and our democracy. We celebrate and wish Madam Speaker the very best. The irony is that, the new Speaker will be presiding over a parliament with one of least impressive records on women's parliamentary representation in the world. Only 20 members of the 230 members of the House are women- a 2.2% drop from the previous House. In 2008, when women constituted 10.9% of parliament, Ghana ranked as number 100 out of 137 in the 2008 Inter Parliamentary Union world ranking- with only 25 women out of 230 MPs. Sadly, Ghana has since sunk further on the global ranking with the unfortunate reduction of female MPs in our new parliament.

We did not only fail to make progress in the last election, but actually fell backward. Ghana today, is far below both Sub-Saharan Africa and the world averages of 18% and 18.4% respectively. We are also below every other regional average which ranges from 9.7% for Arab States- to 41.4% for Nordic countries. Data from the Electoral Commission of Ghana shows women's parliamentary representation in recent elections as follows: 1992 – 8% (with 16 out of 200 seats); 1996- 9% (with 18 out of 200 seats); 2000- 9.5% (19 out of 200 seats); 2004 10.9% (25 out of 230 seats); and 2008- 8.7% (with 20 out of 230 seats). The situation of women's parliamentary representation today is the worst under the country's new democracy. This is a smack in the face of our political parties that boast of being custodians of democratic principles but have more than failed to take women's participation seriously. Only the Convention People's Party (CPP) had a deliberate voluntary quota allocation for women in this election. This is also a serious call to the women's movement to reconsider its approach and strategies on the issues.

Local government level

According to the Ministry of Local Government and Rural development, the previous Government for the first time in its effort to improve the participation of women in the District Assemblies, appointed women to 50% of the 30% of district assembly membership quota reserved for Government

Appointees following the last local elections. This is laudable, but women's representation in overall local government structures and in District Chief Executives (DCEs) positions remain inexcusably low. According to the Institute of Local Government Studies in Ghana, after two decades of the assembly system in Ghana, women, up until 2006, had not made up more than 10% of assembly membership.

There has been a gradual improvement in elected membership of local assemblies from 2.9% in 1994 to 5% in 1998 to over 10% today. A 2003 study- Dake and Herlands Report- on the situation of women's leadership in Ghana showed that only 6%- i.e a mere seven out of the 110 DCEs appointed by the then President were women. It remained less than 11% throughout the Kufour government. This is an area that the current President must do better as he handpicks municipal or district and metro chief executives for the 138 Districts in the country in coming weeks and months.

Moving forward

In coming weeks and months, the President and his team will be filling hundreds and perhaps thousands of political and public positions. Some of these appointments include at least 33 Deputy-Ministers of State, 138 District, Municipal and Metropolitan Chief Executives, Directors of various critical public institutions, and hundreds of ambassadors and diplomats among others. This is the time for the President to demonstrate his commitment and fulfill his campaign promises on women's empowerment. The NDC manifesto explicit commits to "En-Gender governance by actively encouraging women's participation at all levels of Government" and ; The President for instance can easily decide to choose women to fill a fair share of his DCEs positions.

The women's movement in Ghana should take particular interest in the appointments of the DCEs, since the local governments have the most direct impact on the day to day "koko and koose" (bread and butter) issues that affect local women. The women's movement must build on its momentum from the elections make some clear demands on these appointments. The movement should meet with the President- as other interest groups have been doing, to make these demands directly to the him and get a direct commitment from the President remind him of his commitments under his manifesto which states that: *"The NDC accept generally the objectives of the "Women's Manifesto for Ghana" published in April 2004, An NDC Government will work with the sponsors of the Manifesto to incorporate its key demands in the NDC's "Affirmative Action Policy for Women document... to be revised, updated and implemented upon assuming office in 2009."* The good news is- 2009 is here.

Finally, Ghana will be required to render account of its stewardship at the Beijing +15 meeting next year, and so it would be important, if not critical for the imbalance in political participation to be addressed forthwith.

I hope the President will respond to the challenge in not only making Ghana's democracy better, but in making true the fundamental principles of equality and fairness as guaranteed for all by the constitution- regardless of "...place of origin, circumstances of birth, ethnic origin, gender or religion, creed or other beliefs".

ⁱ Mawuli Dake of the Africa Initiative is a leading African human rights advocate and social strategist. He serves on the board of Moremi Initiative for Women's Leadership in Africa. [mawuli@moremiinitiative.org]