



# **“Introducing Quotas in Africa: Discourse in Egypt”**

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### **The Political context**

In 1956, the Egyptian constitution gave women the right to vote and to be nominated for office if they so wished. In 1979, it became mandatory to vote in elections. Two women were nominated as candidates and won in the first general election in 1957.<sup>1</sup> This was considered a major gain and practical experience for women in relation to their nomination and voting rights.

However, this gain came as a result of a long struggle and political history that can be traced back to 1919. At that time, Egyptian women took part in a rally, calling for independence and the end of the British protectorate. In 1923, the idea of the first Egyptian women’s federation emerged, which sought political and socio-economic rights for women. It managed to create a political entity that had a major impact on political life as well as in the face the British occupation. Women, during only a few years, were able to shift from face covering (the wife of the late political leader Saad Zaghloul took off the face cover in 1919) which inspired other women to follow.

Female employees of weaving and textile companies proposed the first code to regulate the work of women. They initiated a strike that aimed to end night shifts and to increase wages. This became law in 1936.<sup>2</sup> However, there were two obstacles that hindered such major political activity of women. The first was the national movement’s position on women’s rights. This assumed that working to attain the rights of workers and farmers would certainly have an impact on both genders, which turned out not to be the case.

Second, the political will represented in four governments after the 1952 revolution did not result in a supportive position for making women a participating power in politics. Rather, the position of the political elite was not much different from the prevailing position towards women.

Although multiple parties started to operate in Egypt in 1977, they did not rank the issue of women's nomination among their priorities. This was coupled with the weakness of the parties themselves, as a consequence of which they experienced low levels of popularity. In fact, this was a result of people's rejection of political activity in general and of party-related work in particular.

However, the two-round voting system had and still has a major impact on the voting process as well as on the relationship between government and citizens. Because of it, people have lost confidence that any elected body will be able to make any change to the lives of citizens. The result is a political culture that calls for passiveness and demonstrates little concern for the participation of citizens.

### **Quota Systems for Women in Egypt**

In 1976, a significant political development occurred in Egypt when it shifted to the multi-party system. In 1977,<sup>3</sup> a law was passed that regulated the activities of political parties – helping to stimulate political groups and to activate a number of popular forces. This shift coincided with the expansion of democracy worldwide, along with the holding of a number of international conferences on the status of women between 1975 and 1995 which produced recommendations on the inclusion of women in politics globally. Such factors affected women's movements in a number of countries, creating a link between international and national efforts for reform. In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was agreed. It included the establishment of women's rights in all fields. It is worth noting that the political leadership welcomed the idea of enforcing Article 4 of the CEDAW, which deals with earmarking parliamentary seats for women. At that time, the political leadership was keen to enhance its international relations, to improve its image and to eliminate areas that diminish human rights, especially when Egypt began to lean towards the Western bloc.

Another important domestic factor was the part played by the First Lady, Gihan Al Sadat (1970–81), who sought to assume an influential social role parallel to the political role played by her husband. She called for the establishment of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), participated in international fora, used her political weight to demand supportive laws for women, and backed the efforts of those who demanded discussion of women's status and the revision of many laws.

On the whole, developments in the 1970s pushed the Egyptian regime into introducing a number of supportive procedures aimed at empowering women on many levels. Most important was political participation. Women were directly granted political rights through the allocation of a quota of parliamentary seats.

#### *At the parliamentary level*

In 1979, a presidential decree was passed regarding the application of the quota system (law 21/1979), defining a formula reserving 30 seats (out of 360 seats) for women in parliament. A broad systems of reservations was implemented, where it was mandatory to vote for two members in each electoral zone: one had to be a farmer and one a worker. In 30 of the zones, there was the additional requirement that at least one woman must be elected, thereby reserving 30 seats for women<sup>4</sup>

The presence of women in the 1979 parliament amounted to a real success. At that time, 35 women (nine percent) became members. In 1984, 36 women became members.<sup>5</sup> The quota system was applied in both instances.

Women, by virtue of the law, were allowed to compete with men for other seats, whereas men were not permitted to contest seats assigned to women. Also, the president has the right to appoint ten members of parliament, including at least two women.

In 1983, the electoral law changed the electoral system from constituency elections to list nominations, in theory making it easier for women to be elected. However, this same law introduced severe restrictions on independent candidacies and non-partisan candidates, which some women perceived as a way of forcing them out of parliament. Such candidates claimed that the law was unconstitutional on the grounds that it prohibits the nomination of those who are not running on a party ticket, thus violating public rights. They also criticised the favouring of women in parliament, stressing the fact that it is a violation of the constitution as well as of the principle of gender equality. As a result, a law was passed in 1986 that cancelled the reserved seats for women.

The cancellation of 30 seats allocated for women was not the only loss. It was followed by another amendment of the electoral system, which saw the return of the majority electoral system. At this point, women lost their weak gains concerning their status in the political arena. This was clearly demonstrated in the next parliamentary cycle when female representation fell to only 2.2 percent.

#### *At the local council level*

The law allocating a quota for women had an impact on local councils, which have a four-year cycle. Initially, female representation was low. During the course of the two cycles when the quota was in effect, female representation rose to between ten and twenty percent. It subsequently fell to 2.11 percent, declining to only 1.2 percent in 1997.<sup>6</sup>

#### *At the level of the Shura Council*

The purpose of the Shura Council is to provide advice on different laws and policies as well as any other decrees submitted by the president. It is also responsible for monitoring the media. The council has 264 members. Two thirds are appointed via elections, while the remaining one third is appointed by the president. The term of the Shura Council is six years.

Established in 1980, the Shura Council has never reserved seats for women. However, it is worth noting that it has witnessed an increase in the number of female members, rising from 3.3 percent to 4.7 percent in 1980 and 1992 respectively, as a result of the increase in the number of female members appointed by the president. The appointment of seats by the president was seen as an indirect measure designed to favour women. In 1992, 91 percent of the president appointed seats went to women, increasing to 100 percent in 1998.<sup>7</sup>

### **Evaluating the Implementation of the Female Quota System in Egypt**

Egypt was one of the first Arab countries to apply the quota system, serving politically underprivileged categories. After the revolution, seats were earmarked for farmers and workers on every elected council. However, the integration of women from underprivileged categories did not occur until 1979. The quota, therefore, is a debatable principle in Egyptian society. We cannot say that it is clearly interwoven in the culture. Although there was, for historical reasons, support for reservations of other categories, this was not the case with reservations applying to women in Egypt.

There are different explanations: A number of papers and studies were commissioned in an effort to analyze the performance of female parliamentarians during the two parliamentary cycles. Determining factors were the nature of the issues that were raised while women were in attendance and their use of legislative and monitoring tools. Carrying out the evaluation in such a manner, however, was unfair, since male members usually had much more experience and newly appointed female representatives did not receive any capacity building to perform parliamentary duties from their respective parties. Hence, their presence did not have any positive impact on the status of women or on the council in general. For instance, during the second cycle of 1984–87, women only raised five political issues. None submitted any draft laws – by contrast, female members who served in the previous parliament submitted ten draft laws. In sum, it is hard to measure and evaluate the initial experience of female representatives without looking into all of the surrounding factors. Political experience is accumulated and must not be judged before it reaches a certain level of growth.

A number of groups focused on and evaluated the female members during their first days, while simultaneously assessing public opinion regarding their performance. As such, it has been a process of intensified monitoring of a new experience, requiring much more work than immediate evaluation and monitoring. While the amount of follow up was massive, the newly appointed women did not receive any objective or effective support and capacity building. Also local women's organizations, such as the National Council for Women (2000), had not yet been created. Furthermore, the parties were and remain disinclined to protect women's rights, especially those related to participation. Most of the parties still integrate women into a specific committee operating primarily in service and social areas and then into the political arena. Therefore, women's names on the voting lists did not reflect a real presence in the party or an actual belief in the necessity of supporting their participation or even succeeding in securing women's votes. As a result, female parliamentarians did not receive the required support from their given parties, and the leftist parties which were well known for active female members were no exception to this rule.

The quota was applied in Egypt in a context of political and socio-economic change. Due to the accelerated events, the society was not well prepared to accept such changes. They were introduced from above by the higher authorities, and hence the grassroots had no input. As a result, the conservatives expressed strong resistance to female participation in parliament, which was seen as a threat to the values governing the relationship between men and women.

In response to this call, the state withdrew the right given before. It tried to lessen the public tension resulting from economic and political pressures. Meanwhile, the assassination of President Sadat in 1981, only two years after the quota came into effect, resulted in a change of government, which repealed the quota system.

Again, the political orientations changed with the new government, this is especially true in its management of the relations with different social forces. Only five years after taking over, in 1986, the new government enacted a law that cancelled the quota, followed in 1990 by approval of the majoritarian electoral system. Women's hopes for increased political representation were dashed.

Although all progressive forces were frustrated with the repealing of the quota, there were some positive dimensions to the experience. For instance, simply introducing the quota for women was a positive point, which developed into a dialogue around the importance of effective female parliamentary participation. This was a springboard for the establishment of a number of NGOs and projects dealing with female political empowerment, and led the progressive forces in society to play an active role regarding women's political participation. At this time, a number of papers and

studies began to appear that addressed the political participation of women, including an evaluation of the experience. UN conferences, in particular the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994, served as a platform for the introduction of the issue to the general public. The ICPD was followed by the Beijing Conference in 1995, a number of other conferences, and CEDAW follow-up reports submitted by different countries.

### **Quotas: Two Conflicting Camps**

Implementation of the quota generated hot debate in Egypt between two conflicting camps. Proponents included a number of progressive forces, women's activists, and human rights organizations. Opponents, meanwhile, were represented by conventional forces, a group of legal specialists, and a large sector of society that wanted women to remain at home.

#### *The first camp: Proponents*

Proponents adopt a positive perception towards the implementation of quotas, basing their arguments on the following:

- Equality: the number of women amounts to almost half in any society. It is unfair for half of the society to be deprived of a chance of representation at all levels of parliamentary councils. In fact, women face difficult circumstances, including in regard to per capita income, wealth, education, leadership positions, strategic communication, and time allocated for public activities. Therefore, constitutional and political regimes must compensate for all of this by assigning a minimum number of seats for women. Equality entails that the ratio between the number of women and the total population be proportionate.
- Proponents, including women and men, believe that women never seek to prioritise their interests over those of others. Rather, they try to use their power to serve the interests of others. That is, women do not adopt a win or lose approach when dealing with power relations. They stress the different perspective of women towards war and peace relations, social services, and family status, which does not stem from their own interests. Instead, it is an expression of a wider viewpoint, which is in harmony with the real needs of the majority of the people.<sup>8</sup>
- Quotas are not viewed as a violation of equality as defined by the constitution. Proponents argue that all citizens should not be subject to unified rules that provide only theoretical equality, which do not recognize existing differences. Based on this, the allotment of seats for women, representing half of the society, who are unable to reach into these bodies is compatible with the equality-related constitutional provision as well as with the recommendations from CEDAW.<sup>9</sup>

#### *The second camp: Opponents*

Based on the patriarchal view that men are more capable of political activity in general and of parliamentary activity in particular, opponents disapprove of the quota system. This group believes that men have the necessary political experience to take on relevant struggles, which is a part of the parliamentary process. This camp also believes that the interests of women are part of society's overall interests which any of the elected members, male or female, can defend. In addition, there are many common interests that do not require the efforts of a certain gender.

Here they perceive the implementation of quotas as an imposition of the political leadership, not necessarily reflecting a real study of the needs or a consideration of the existing environment. Rather,

it reflects the personal desire of the élite, and is far from being a natural expression of a social or national interest. Under the quota system, female members are in parliament as a result of a gift from the political authority. As such, they will have to toe the party line, which will certainly make it hard for them to play a real parliamentary role, which entails questioning and confronting government policy and its programmes.

According to this camp, it is better for women to strive to attain parliamentary representation that offers the opportunity to gain real political experience, to act as a role model, and to gain legitimacy. They also see the favouring of any gender as a clear violation of the constitution, which stipulates that citizens are equal and that there is to be no discrimination in regard to gender, race, language or religion. The application of the quota system does not result in real achievements for women or even for the zones that they represent. As such, it is both unfeasible and unconstitutional to apply the quota. In addition, they underline the poor performance of female parliamentarians who benefited from the quota in the past. Stating that women represent women implies that men represent only men, establishing the gender factor as a discriminating standard among citizens.<sup>10</sup>

### **Empowering Women and Promoting Active Participation in Elected councils**

Female participation was and still is superficial and symbolic: women do not occupy any of the high ranking positions in Egypt's political parties. Playing an active and more effective role in the country's parties might help women to acquire the political experience needed to participate in the electoral process more broadly. It might also be the preferred option for the political parties to assign a certain quota for women as candidates for the legislative nomination. This could secure a better opportunity for an active participatory role for women on the one hand, and counter any claim of unconstitutionality regarding government quotas in favour of women on the other.

It is necessary for institutions to play a more positive and constructive role to encourage women's participation. A more positive image of women as active and equal partners should be the cornerstone of the values promoted by the socialization process. The modest attempt of the government so far falls short of these objectives, both in regard to scope and content, especially in the Egyptian educational system.

The role of the media with its far reaching effect, should be drastically changed from a reflective mirror of the government orientation and policies of the backward of the social values and customs into a more progressive role dealing with women as an active indispensable player in the development process. More support should be extended to the many NGOs and university research centres that are attempting to train qualified women for more active and organized political participation. Experienced females should be a positive model for other women. A mentoring system should be established for those young women who are heavily involved in community affairs, or are active in student unions. Training and preparing through persistent organized mentoring would result in the comprehensive empowerment of women, leading not only to a higher level of political participation, but also to effective participation. Finally, working with and for civil society organizations provides a solid base to gain awareness and knowledge of public issues, thereby possibly paving the way for increased participation of women in public affairs.

## Endnotes

1. Abou-Zeid, Gihan. 'Women in Parliament in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon'. In Karam, Azza. 1998. *Women in Parliament Beyond Numbers*. Stockholm: IDEA. p. 43.
  - 2 Makled, Shahenda. 2001. *History of Egyptian Women Movement*. Paper presented to Women Political Participation Seminar. Lebanon. p.1.
  - 3 Abou Zeid, Ola. 'The Political, Legal Framework for Multiparty System from 1976–1992'. In Elsyed, Kamel and Elmanfaloty, Kmal (eds). *The reality of multiparty system in the transformation into capitalism and political participation*. Cairo: Arab Research Center. p. 67.
  - 4 Abou Zeid , Ola. 'Women at the Advent of the New Century'. Paper presented at conference (incomplete reference). p. 32.
  - 5 Wahby, Azza. "Quota system as a tool to activate a women role in parliament". *Parliament Issues*. Issue no. 32. Political and Strategy Research Center. p. 43.
  - 6 National Women Council. 2001. *Arab women report 2001*. First report. p. 211.
  - 7 Abou Zeid, Ola. 'Egyptian Experience in Quota System'. In Goaa, Salwa. *Women Representation in Elected Councils*. Public Administration Studies Center. p. 177.
  - 8 Mustafa K. Elsyed in the *ibid*.
  - 9 *Ibid*.
  - 10 *Ibid*.
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