

Muslim Women Barangay Councilors and the Political Culture of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi in the Southern Philippines*

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Introduction

The idea of Muslim women participating in politics has been a source of debate amongst people who believe that the place of women is in the home and those who believe otherwise. There have been a number of articles discussing the merits of either side. But the decision as to which side is winning is not yet in.

What is apparent on the ground is that women have been actively participating in politics, not just in the local levels of leadership but in the higher levels as well. Santanina Rasul was the highest Muslim woman to be elected for the Senate. There have been Muslim congresswomen, assemblywomen, governor, mayor and now, women barangay¹⁾ leaders.

The entry of Philippine Muslim women into politics is part of the general political culture encouraged at the national level. The great breakthrough was the presidency of Corazon C. Aquino. However, Muslim women were already participating in politics dating to the Sultanate period. The sultanate of Sulu had a queen in the person of Pangyan Hadji Piyandao who succeeded to the throne after Jamalul Kiram 11 died.

This paper highlights the participation of Muslim women at the barangay levels and contextualizing their participation within the political culture of the areas in which they live, in this case, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi.

Profile of Muslim Women Barangay Councilors

Demographic Characteristics

1. Age

The most striking character of the women elected to the barangay council of Jolo and Bongao is that many were already middle-aged.

Seniority is a status given much respect in terms of the accumulated wisdom and stability an individual acquires as he/she progresses through life. Age often times legitimizes one's qualification as a figure of authority. In many areas, individuals who occupy leadership positions are referred to as "Tao Maas" or elder.

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2. Civil Status

Majority of the women was also married. Marriage is not only recognition of adulthood but also the stage when individuals are regarded as capable of undertaking more responsibilities in the family as well as in the community. For married women, the restrictions on movements usually prescribed for single women are not as stringent so they are more able to move about and express their opinions in mixed groups.

3. Education

Some of the councilors obtained college education but majority either obtained only elementary or high school levels.

Majority finished Qur'anic school where they learned to read and recite the Qur'an. Many went to Madrasah school.

4. Occupation

Majority of the councilors were full-time housewives so most of their functions as barangay officials take place within the ambit of household duties. A large number were in business while a few were government employees and professionals.

Political Involvement

1. Family Tradition

Involvement in politics was primarily a continuation of their family's political tradition. As it turns out, many of the women barangay councilors show an extensive line of ancestors, relatives and immediate family members who are or have been in politics.

Family's involvement in politics cannot be underestimated since a family's influence in the barangay multiplies through the years as marital links and kin networks grow and spread. Most often, one or two families in terms of numbers and influence dominate a barangay. Political leaders would usually come from these groups as rivals or as allies.

2. Goals

The main goal for entering politics was to help the community. This translates into providing basic services which are either inadequate or non-existent in many barangays. Many projects of the barangays were pointed in this direction and priorities were given to construction of footbridges, artesian wells, water tanks, cementing barangay roads, building schools, health centers, markets and *masajid*.

3. Personal Attributes

For women councilors, helpfulness is the most significant personal attribute that they think will make them succeed in their job.

Other attributes demonstrated by them were generosity, resourcefulness and hard work. Some examples on generosity are: the willingness to donate a piece of land on which to build a school, or a *masjid*; use of personal funds to buy medicines for indigent constituents, for installation of street lights, for improvements and beautification of *masajid*.

Resourcefulness was shown in the successful use of networking with other government agencies to construct much needed toilets in a barangay, solicitation of funds from political allies and friends, even having a raffle to raise funds.

Finally hard work and determination was expressed by the women councilors in the way they looked at their job as exceeding an eight to five function. People come to them at any time day or night and their activities often take them outside their own barangays.

4. Support Base

The family, friends and local residents really stand out as the main supporters of the women councilors before and during their terms of office. These people become the linchpin that kept the candidate's chance of winning on the move. They distribute campaign materials, act as campaign leaders and advisers, accompany the candidate in campaign sorties and rallies, provide food, drinks, cigarettes and transportation to ferry voters to the polls.

All told, elections can be regarded as a family enterprise with a supporting cast of the groups already mentioned.

Problems Faced by the Women Councilors: Cultural Barriers

1. Authoritarian Style of the Barangay Captain

Some specific instances mentioned by the women councilors are the following: the barangay captain does not call regular meetings; makes personal decisions without the knowledge of the council; does not share the results of meetings held in Manila; does not allot funds for the individual projects of the members of the council.

2. "Double Burden" Syndrome

Since majority of the women councilors were housewives and mothers, they have to take care of children and perform household functions on top of their official duties. For this reason many work from their homes amidst the welter of household operations.

Lack of Higher Educational Qualification

More than half of the women councilors did not go to college. This limits their opportunities in availing themselves of new and helpful technologies and concepts.

Lack of Political Expertise and Experience

Many, if not all, of the women barangay councilors, did not have any previous experience in holding a political office. It would be advantageous had these women gained some experience in other organizations to give them confidence and expertise needed in holding public office.

Image Projected: Nurturing image

The attributes that women councilors considered as useful in politics are characteristics that support a leadership image and style often described as "soft" or motherly and associated with motherhood and women in general.

1. Peacemakers

Given the context of conflict in their areas, women barangay councilors believe that they are better equipped to handle peacemaking efforts. According to them, women are by nature gentle and temperamentally more inclined to peace.

2. Reformers

Women barangay councilors say they would like to lessen corruption in political offices. This view stems from the perception that women are generally less corruptible.

In addition, they believe that their presence in politics can discourage the practice of character assassination or “black propaganda” during campaign periods and thereby clean up parts of the electoral process.

In sum, these qualities project what is known as “transformational” image which follows the pattern of behavior associated with transformational type of leadership described by Patricia Lee Sykes as those seeking “to change individual citizens, their states, their societies and the relationship among these.”²⁾

Future Plans

More than half of the women barangay councilors like their jobs and plan to stay in politics, while others have plans of running for higher office. Besides wanting to continue to help their community, some wanted to have a bigger scope of responsibilities.

Those no longer interested cited reasons such as age, wanting to do other things, giving a chance for others to run, lack of higher education, and the desire to rest. There was an admission from one woman barangay councilor that politics is not good for her.

Two Significant Factors in Women’s Political Participation

Family involvement in politics

The family-based type of politics is very typical in Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Many of the Councilors and Barangay Captains were members of politically prominent families. For instance, the Barangay Captain of San Raymundo was the widow of the late governor of Sulu and also belongs to a political clan whose members have occupied various elected and appointed offices on the municipal, provincial, regional and national levels at one time or another. The Barangay Captain of Chinese Pier is the daughter of a politically prominent family whose uncles were a former mayor, then assemblyman of ARMM; and, vice-provincial governor of Sulu respectively. The late vice-mayor of Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, who was elevated to this position from Senior Councilor, was married to a politically prominent man in their own locality.

In some cases, there were no males who could qualify for office so the women were asked to run in order to keep the family in power. One example was the Barangay Captain of Pakias of Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, who was selected for the position by her family because she was the most qualified among them. Another example was the case of the mayor of an island in Tawi-Tawi who had held the position for several terms. In the 1993 elections, he ran for governor. Because he had no sons, he asked one of his daughters to run for mayor. Since the island is acknowledged as the political bailiwick of the family, the daughter easily won. Another daughter ran for the ARMM assembly and also won.

Family ties are important in providing women’s political participation a solid base of support. This gave many, if not all of the candidates, a chance to succeed. Family members provide funds and other material support; more important, they provide the workforce of the candidate during and after the election. However, a new trend seems to be apparent; that is of women politicians running for office without an extensive family

network. How far they can go or stay in politics without this support remains to be seen.

Family ties also provide reflected status on women candidates. Two women barangay captains were already cited as having benefited from the political activities of their families. Another Councilor also belong to the same clan but whose brother was a popular MNLF commander. That these women also happened to be relatives is not all surprising.

Social class

Most of the women belong to middle and upper social classes. Although election at the barangay level does not encourage the use of high financing, nevertheless, some funding cannot be avoided. Wealthy candidates are seen as potential help in times of troubles when personal finances must be relied on to help constituents. Social prestige also count because of the influence such status gives to the candidate and by extension to her supporters. However, these assets can be of little use if constituents perceive that the candidate is not willing to use them to help others. This is the well-known “*Panumtuman*” or “Remembrance” concept of the Tausug that can be turned into political assets in the future. Individuals who have not extended any help or any act of kindness to others are considered as “*way tumtumun*” or persons with nothing to remember them by. Thus a person with political aspiration must be seen as being generous to and approachable by potential voters to earn substantial political capital that will ensure victory in an election. Elected officials who generously give their time, efforts and resources to their constituents are regarded in the category of “*mallaguh in tumtumun*” or (great remembrance or memories) in contrast to officials with nothing to remember by (*way tumtumun*). People who do not remember deeds of kindness and generosity accorded to them are considered ingrates and dismissed as not good people to deal with. In other words, the traditional concept of reciprocity also runs through politics.

Some Opinions on Women’s Political Participation

While there is no evident outcry against women candidacies, there is also no strong push for more women candidates either. In fact, while an underlying gender-bias can be felt, the situation can best be described as in flux. This is because there are mixed opinions regarding women political participation amongst different sectors of society.

Among the judges of the Shariah Courts of Sulu, the lone woman judge stated that there is no provision against women leadership in the Shariah. She cited the leadership of Aisha, the widow of the Prophet, in reconciling disputes among the early Muslims; and even leading Muslims into battle. Her own appointment as a judge however was questioned by an OMA official who declared “This is the mistake of the President, appointing a woman as a judge.” She stated that qualification and competence are better criteria for selection than gender.

Two male judges and an Arabic consultant present a different position. All agree that there is a gradation of leadership, the highest post however must be held by men. It was pointed out that in Pakistan and Bangladesh, countries with women prime-ministers, the prime-ministership is not the highest position. There is a President who can dismiss the Prime Minister from office with cause. In this sense, they point out that the women prime ministers were still under the leadership of men. The arguments were made on the

proposition that “*in usug labi siya marayaw daing sin babai mag-uhan ha katan pakarajjan*” (men are better than women in being leaders in all matters).

These informants said that this argument is based on certain precedents such as: there has not been a woman prophet or religious leader; it is an obligation for men to conduct *jiḥād*, while it is only permissible for women to do the same; since the head of the family is the father, the head of the nation should also be the man. One judge said that personally he will not vote for a woman candidate running for president but will do so if the woman is running for governor or mayor provided she is qualified to do so. Although the governor and mayor are both executives in their own right, in the hierarchy of government officials, they are under the highest office of the land, the presidency. But when the president is a woman, this argument will no longer be valid.

Two religious leaders also have different opinions. The *imam* of Bus-Bus declares that women can be leaders if they are well-educated, they can even become presidents. He notes that even if the politician is a man but he is not well-educated, his ability to make far-reaching decisions is limited. Besides, he stresses the fact that the Qur’an has not made any declaration that women cannot be leaders. He voted for Cory and is a strong supporter of the woman councilor of his barangay.

The other religious leader, a graduate from Al-Azhar, allows that there are different interpretations among the *ulama* (religious leaders) regarding women leadership. The debate centers on whether women can or cannot be leaders or whether they can be leaders under some qualification or circumstances. He cited the jurist Ibn Hizam who stated that women are prohibited from holding position of public leadership such as the presidency of the country but can be leaders in other areas. Thus, this religious leader did not vote for Cory but voted for Senator Rasul. He pointed out that the *ulama* in Cotabato has taken the position that women are totally prohibited from taking leadership position.

Two academicians reiterate similar points. One also pointed out that the Qur’an has not banned or declared it *ḥaram* (forbidden) for women to become leaders. It is however recognized that women have certain limitations (i.e., biological) that make it less appropriate for them to be leaders. The informant nevertheless stressed that qualified women can become leaders if no qualified man is available.

The other informant stated that while he had “no right to stop them (women) from running for political office,” if he had his way, he won’t allow women to run for politics. In fact, he claims that if the Islamic Code is implemented in the Autonomous Region, women cannot run for office. Although this informant has voted for women councilor, he did not vote for Cory Aquino. He makes this distinction: a councilor is a lawmaker, not a decision-maker. But he admits that women are more effective administrators than men since they are “*mahaggut*” (cool), approachable and accessible but they should be in academic or business field rather than in politics.

The opinion coming from the *madaris* (religious schools) is also noticeably conservative. Here the passive role of women in politics is greatly emphasized. According to an *ustadha* (female teacher), the role of men and women in society is complementary but different and separate, generally reiterating the same arguments of separate domains, clearly defining that the women should have nothing to do with politics.

The lady teacher and her father, also a teacher, claim that they did not vote for women candidates for Barangay Captain but they did vote for women candidates for

Councilor. However, they did not make the same reservation that in the absence of qualified men, or in mixed societies (not majority Muslim), women can be leaders. They see no problems with women as head of schools.

Interviews with a number of ordinary people however show a more pervasive bias regarding women leadership than was expected. Asked whether Islam allowed women to be leaders, six males gave a “No” answer. The women gave a less definite answer, one saying “if the society is mixed, it is allowed,” and the other saying “depends.” One said “No.” two men said “yes” outright without making any qualification while one said “can be if there are no men.” The last phrase is often given as a condition for allowing women to become leaders. Whether men are qualified to be leaders seem less important than the fact that they are simply males.

But for women to become leaders, just in case no men happen to be around, they must be models of excellence. They must exhibit such qualities as intelligence, God-consciousness, educated, knowledgeable in religion, honest, not treacherous, wealthy. In spite of having these qualities, majority of the informants still believes that a society under a woman leader will not be progressive. Many cited these reasons: “Women are weak, they are easily frightened by men, they are indecisive, softhearted, and they cannot control the people.”

Here the notion of governance as male-oriented is supplemented by the idea that the governance is also control of people. In this context, control is associated with male superior strengths. Naturally, women are often judged wanting in this area and they are dismissed as incapable of governance. One woman Barangay Captain retorted that this kind of perception does not make all males qualified or females unqualified. She said, “*minsan usug bang makalingug*” (even if a male, but he is a troublemaker what good will he bring to the community?)

Some informants cited the fact that in the history of Muslim states, there have been no women leaders. This is contradicted by recent literatures showing that indeed there have been many women rulers. The ignorance of many Muslims regarding this historical information only goes to show how successful had been the campaign to erase the presence of women leaders from the pages of history. While women were often mentioned in biographies, this was primarily because of their connection to prominent male leaders and secondarily to imply that the state suffered because of their leadership. Now that these information are coming to light, perhaps a different perception will emerge, especially among those whose opinions reflect that height of gender bias, to wit:

To me no matter how good she is (she is still not qualified to run for public office);
No matter how good she is, still it is not good for women to be leaders;
If it is a woman, it is not good;
Women cannot be considered good leaders.

In spite of these opinions, majority voted for a woman candidate; said that they would vote for a woman running for president, governor or mayor. This leads to the notion that there is a great deal going on behind public utterances and actual behavior. If this is true, there is hope that traditional perception will give way to enlightened ones.

Knowing this bias, the number of women elected as Councilors/Barangay Captains can

be taken as indicative of a positive trend. Religious interpretations discriminating against women leadership while seemingly widespread so far has not resulted in the elimination of women from the leadership position; or at least from the public sphere. It is worth noting that there have already been many women mayors. The most recent is the lady mayor of Panglima Sugala in Tawi-Tawi. This would make her the local head of a municipality with the consent of the local populace. Other women who have assumed the Office of Mayor are: Hadja Titina Anni of Siasi, Sulu (wife of then Congressman Anni), the Mayor of Languyan (wife of then Governor Gerry Matba), Hadja Leonor Tulawie of Lugus, Sulu (wife of Mayor Jin Tulawie) Jean Yasin of Maluso, Basilan (a member of a prominent political family of Basilan), Hadja Darao Hayudini of Panglima Tahil (formerly Marungas Island, Sulu). Princess Tarhata Lucman (wife of the late Sultan Rashid Lucman) was the first lady governor of Lanao del Sur. There were no protests from the people regarding the election of these women.

Admittedly, these women were related to powerful male politicians who were their husbands, fathers, brothers or kins. The social and political prestige of the male relatives are such that they can carry their women candidates to victory. This is the pattern in the history of Muslim countries (and in other Asian countries as well) where women have risen to power. Whether or not Muslim women can become leaders on the strength of their own merit remains to be seen.

Some institutions like the Shariah courts, *madaris* (schools), and *masajid* (mosques) have not made any overt effort to stop women from becoming political leaders. One reason maybe the effect of the external environment, in this case, the larger political culture of the Philippines where the participation of women in politics reached its pinnacle in the election of Corazon Aquino as President repeated in the current presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Further away, the election of women prime ministers in other Muslim countries has also exerted positive influence on Muslim women political aspirations. The more the external environment promotes the political participation of the women, the more positive would be the chances of Muslim women in their own setting. However, if these women are unable to perform well, the bias against women leaders will no doubt be heightened. Their performances will inevitably be used as markers to deny or affirm women leadership roles in the future.

Implications

Muslim women in politics, as a societal development, have to be contextualized also within an Islamic resurgence, which asserts both a conservative and a progressive tradition. If the conservative trend becomes dominant, as it once did in Afghanistan, not only will Muslim women political participations suffer a setback, but the general situation of Muslim women will no doubt also suffer. On the other hand, the progressive stream is also evident in the increasing participation of Muslim women in civil society as organized groups working in different areas of endeavors. The different Muslim women NGOs range from cooperatives to cultural, educational and religious associations. While Muslim women are members of women political parties like Gabriela and Abanse Pinay, so far there is no move to form a political party of their own.

In the Philippines where two women have been elected to the presidency, the progressive trend is on the march. Muslim women's over-all situation, however, is not

improved by the continuing conflict in Mindanao. Gains in social development cannot be sustained with every outbreak of conflict. Although a peace agreement was already signed in 1996 with the MNLF, this did not prevent conflicts from occurring starting in 2000 up to the present, the latest of which was the recent “war” in Sulu. It goes without saying that the usual victims of these conflicts are women and children.

This situation has galvanized Muslim women to be more involved and engaged in various activities including politics.

Conclusion

To sum up, the number of Muslim women entering politics at the barangay level is still very small but they are thriving. Overall, women political participation has still to reach a critical mass and this will take sometime.

The political culture in the area consists of an underlying gender-bias against women entering politics, which is still quite persistent particularly among males since this is articulated by individuals from different educational and occupational levels. This situation is not unique since women elsewhere are also discriminated in politics.

On the surface, this bias has slightly given way to external events such as the elections of women into high offices. Nationally, a growing pro-women policy affirms the positive role of women in society in general and in politics in particular. The passage of the Women in Nation-building Law five years ago is just one of these affirmative policies. Internationally, the election of Muslim women to high offices like in Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan and Bangladesh are encouraging to Muslim women. However, the performances of women leaders, in general, and of Muslim women, in particular, tend to become markers either to reject/deny or accept/promote women participation in politics.

Notes:

- 1) The *barangay* is the smallest political-administrative unit in the Philippines and its officials are directly elected by the people.
- 2) Sykes, Patricia Lee, “Women as National Leaders-Patterns and Prospects,” in Michael A. Genovese ed., *Women as National Leaders* (London: Sage Publications Inc., 1993), 220.