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RESPONSIBLE POLITICS IN AFRICA AND SOUTH AFRICA. A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

This essay sets out to discuss politics and responsible political leadership. It situates the discussion in the context of Africa in general and South Africa in particular. The essay does not purport to paint a comprehensive and broad representation of politics and political leadership but employs an African feminist pragmatic critical methodology in discussing responsible politics and political leadership. This approach uses contextual case studies, stories and experiences to elucidate political, ethical, and epistemological concepts and discourses.

Feminist pragmatic critical approaches are generally premised on the understanding that theological and ethical reflection ought to be grounded on the commitment to justice and 'the fullness of life' (John 10:10) for all humanity, especially for those members of society who are marginalised, excluded or undermined by politics and/or by political leaders. As aptly put by Chopp, the general norm for pragmatic critical approaches is 'emancipatory transformation'.¹ This approach recognises that theological and ethical reflections are historically, individually, and socially contextual. It does not purport to promote universal arguments that are valid for all people, all places and all times. It affirms that all reflections evolve out of specific situations.

Due to their commitment to emancipatory transformation and commitment to justice, African feminist pragmatic critical approaches are relevant to the constructive development of responsible ethical leadership in specific contexts. They are also generally counter-cultural to the dominant political epistemological conceptions of political leadership, which to a large extent tend to emphasise distance and objectivity in theological and ethical reflections. The present paper comprises a contextual case study and social, political and gender analysis of political leadership in South Africa. The analysis will explore the use and abuse of political power and gender justice in politics and political leadership. This will be followed by identification of African feminist ethical strategies that can inform responsible, life-affirming, political leadership doing justice to gender in Africa.

1. Contemporary Political Leadership Questions in South Africa. A Case Study

In June 2005, South African President Thabo Mbeki announced before the Parliament the dismissal of South Africa Deputy President Jacob Zuma. The former claimed that the decision was informed by a number of considerations, including that: a) it was his constitutional prerogative to do so as the leader of the country; b) although Zuma had not been found guilty in a court of law, the decision was in part influenced by the information contained in Judge Hillary Squires judgement in the fraud and corruption case of the Durban businessman, Schabier Shaik (in this judgement, Judge Squires had concluded that there was a 'generally corrupt relationship' between the deputy president Zuma and the businessman who was his financial advisor); and c) the decision and the sacking of Zuma was a practical demonstration and commitment by the South African government and the African National Congress (ANC) leadership to deal with corruption in government and society, and to consolidate democratic leadership.²

A week after the dismissal of Jacob Zuma, Mbeki appointed Phumizile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the first ever woman in the history of South Africa to be appointed to the office of deputy president. Before her appointment, she had held positions as the minister of minerals and energy. She had led a non-governmental organisation in Cape Town during the apartheid era. She was also a member of parliament representing the ANC party.

The sacking of Zuma and the appointment of Mlambo-Ngcuka as the deputy president of South Africa were met with divergent political reactions. Opposition parties commended Mbeki for doing the morally right thing. Patricia de Lille, a party political leader and founder of the Independent democrats, called it 'a proud day for South Africa'. Bantu Holomisa of the United Democratic Movement (UDM) said that 'the president's decision, which although difficult, was made in the interest of the country'. The Pan African Congress party leader Motsoko Pheko said that this was a good pronouncement and will protect the image of the nation. (However, he also pointed out that the former president should be given the opportunity to clear his name, stating that the trial of Zuma by the media was 'unfair', and that this had created confusion and uncertainty in the country.³) The chamber of business stated that this was the right thing to do, and so did the South African Council of Churches. Transparency International commended the President's commitment to uprooting corruption, affirming gender justice and the capability of women's political leadership.⁴

Others, however, such as the biggest trade union in South Africa (COSATU) and the South African communist party (which are in a tripartite alliance with the African National Congress party) as well

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as the ANC youth league contended the decision. They claimed that Zuma's sacking was not solely based on his association with Shaik, but was also due to his popularity amongst the ordinary, the poor and majority members of the ANC and South African society, who were weary of the dominance of pro-capital leaders promoting neoliberal economic agenda instead of being pro-poor. Others even went on to suggest that Zuma had been sacked because he had expressed his apprehension with the South African government/Mbeki's trend to fast-tracking hyper-capitalist policies through the macro-economic policy of Growth Employment and Redistribution, which was similar in mode to the former structural adjustments programmes imposed to Africa by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank through processes such as privatisation of public assets and services. Newspapers such as *Business Day* carried out news articles that highlighted the contradictions and ethical discrepancies in appointing Mlambo-Ncquka as the deputy president of South Africa. According to Mde, the contradictions were that the incoming deputy president was also indirectly embroiled in a corruption case involving a South African petro-chemical company, which her brother benefited from during a term when she sat on the board as the minister of energy and minerals.⁵ Three months after the appointment of the new deputy president, who had been well received by the public in some quarters and booed in others in September 2005, the leader of the ACDP party Kenneth Meshoe enquired about the policy measures that were put in place to accord proper respect she deserved. This was after calls had been made in the gatherings of COSATU and ANC youth league for Zuma to be reinstated, as well as the booing of Mlambo-Ncquka in public gatherings. The president is recorded to have said she was 'a very grown-up girl' and did not need any protective measures to ensure she was respected.⁶

Before the analysis of this case study, it is important to point out that corruption by political leaders has been caricatured as inextricably bound to politics and political leadership in Africa through literature on international corruption, such as the corruption indexes of Transparency International and others. While these caricatures are important in enabling countries to gauge the levels of corruption in their regions, they have tended to be flawed in the sense that they never discuss or even dismiss the activities of the bribers, whom in many instances come from corporate sectors based in countries of the North. This is true in the corruption scandals in the Lesotho Highlands Water project where, for example, French companies bribed the senior leaders in the project. It is also true in the South African Defence scandal where Tony Yengeni received a high discount from Daimler Chrysler leaders who had in turn benefited from the arms' deal. The overemphasis or association of corruption with Africa as

the popular political scandal of African politics is tantamount to stereotyping because corruption is not only found in Africa. It would be presumptuous therefore to assume that corruption represents the full range of ethical challenges which African states or African political leaders are confronted to.

There are a number of issues that the case study above reveals about the conception of politics and political leadership: gender justice and equality of women and men in political leadership; external and coercive international control; the desire by some African leaders to be seen to be dealing with corruption by the world and the images and tensions that these create in local politics as well as issues of authority, representation versus participation in liberal democratic politics.

2. Politics and Political Leadership. Clarification of Concepts

My attempt in this section is to analyse the conceptions of politics and political leadership that are in part observable in the case study, but also in the literature or discourses on politics and political leadership. Mainstream definitions of politics and African political leadership tend to focus on male-stream public leadership. Politics is defined as 'striving for the share of power or for influence on the distribution of power, whether it be between states or between groups of people contained within a single state.'⁷ In agreement to this definition the Kenyan theologian Gathaka thus suggests that 'anyone engaged in politics is striving for power, either power as a means to attain other goals (which may be ideal or selfish), or power for its own sake, which is to say, in order to enjoy the feeling of prestige by power.'⁸

Nürnbergger presents a somewhat similar explanation of politics.⁹ He sees politics as the attempt of a society to make collective life possible and prosperous through the establishment and maintenance of a social order that binds all its members. He puts forward 10 elements that he asserts characterise politics. These are:

- maintenance of security, prosperity and dignity for a small group, a larger section of the population, or all members of the population;
- political power which he refers to as 'the capacity to influence one's social environment. In economic life the means is wealth and in social life, it is status, in political life it is power';¹⁰
- the third element is that 'the use of power must be legitimate in the eyes of society concerned';¹¹
- the fourth idea is that politics is pervasive. It affects all parts of our common life;

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- the political dimensions of life are inescapable. Human life needs to be structured whether we like it or not. There are sections of population that are deliberately excluded from the normal channels of political activities. These include the young, women and certain racial groups;
- political life is always concerned with politics as well as with institutions which determine policies and which shape institutions such as state, economic order and organisation of social relations and smaller institutions;
- the presence of stable political institutions, which are however, not immutable. He further asserts that ‘the political order is man-made, under the control of man and meant to serve the interest of man’¹² (note the exclusive language);
- the existence of competition of views. An example he uses to demonstrate this is that ‘the political process involves people of all persuasions, clashes of opinions cannot be avoided... opinions differ at 3 levels... basic convictions, interests of competing groups in society (self-interest) and the ideological justifications of the differing groups;’¹³
- clashes of opinion become politically potent through the use of power with different groups struggling with each other for greater influence; and
- there are always two extremes of political power: a stronger and a weaker group. The stronger group coerces the weaker group into submission. The stronger group also expects the whole population to subscribe to its particular sets of convictions.

These descriptions of political power tend to portray power as something that politics is about. They also tend to portray competition as normative for politics. In order to conceive of notions of responsible political leadership, it is important to examine discourses on political leadership in Africa and to explore whether they merge or differ with the definitions of politics above. In his article ‘Pan-Africanism, Democracy and Leadership in Africa: The Continuing Legacy for the New Millennium,’ the famous African social scientist, Ali Mazrui, identifies at least eight types of leadership which he observes in African politics. These are: charismatic leadership based on drawing large support from society (e.g. Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah); mobilisation leader (e.g. Julius Nyerere); reconciliation leader, in which a leader seeks compromise and consensus among disparate points of views (e.g. General Abdulsalami Abubaker); house-keeping political leader-style, in which the leader uses political power in the minimalist sense of purposely governing without leading – it is

more maintenance without movement (e.g. Kenyan political elite since 1980); disciplinarian leader who is an austere no-nonsense figure (e.g. Murtala Mohammad of Nigeria); patriarchal leader, who is perceived as a father figure and therefore has the right to lead (e.g. Jomo Kenyatta); elder and patriarch, who because of his age and gender is perceived as a leader for all (e.g. Nelson Mandela) and finally technocratic political leaders, who advance and shape development (e.g. Thabo Mbeki).¹⁴

It would seem to me that mainstream and male-stream discourses on politics and political leadership tend to associate leadership with men. They are also inclined to emphasising contest and competition of power by differing and rival and/or hostile groups. They limit politics to activities taking place in the public sphere, forgetting or discounting those taking place in what is called the 'domestic' sphere as constituting the realm of politics. In the entire typology of political leaders provided by Mazrui, the association is made to men. This in my view is a distortion and promotes the myth that leadership models are synonymous with men. Association of political leadership with men as though they are synonymous erroneously promotes the perception that women's leadership is a gift to women. It also 'reminds us of how embarrassingly sexist the field [of politics and political leadership] has been... with distinctively 'masculine' virtues as opposed to women whose feminine features are almost inevitably include some for sentimentality.'¹⁵ They also explain in part why politics has become dispassionate to the plight of the downtrodden, the poor, and the excluded in contemporary political discourse.

African feminist conceptions of politics are different. Politics and political leadership are not understood merely as matters of interest groups competing for power within the state. They are understood as the constant and ongoing personal and collective 'negotiation of all aspects of organisation, public activities and social and cultural practices.'¹⁶ They are under girded by the view that 'power is inherent in all these activities and institutions, all are open to the possibility of political critique and action.'¹⁷ They are also grounded on the understanding that politics ought to include women and those marginalised by party politics or institutional politics. Burdezeij expresses this view beautifully when he says that the notions of political spheres 'possess much broader meaning: they embrace social spheres that cannot be reduced to their temporary and institutional forms.'¹⁸

Politics and political leadership for African feminist ethicists therefore encompass the mutual and respectful cooperation of various individuals, communities, groups, and individuals in their different locations, motivated by their own beliefs and acting toward some common good (such as the fullness of life for all people, men and women and the earth as politics). This view to some extent critiques

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the liberal distinction and/or polarisation between the public and private. It points to the fact that such a polarisation reduces the scope, dynamism as well as the complexity of politics and political leadership. Such polarisations are distortions. This is because both the private and public are not static; they inform and transform each other.

African feminist conceptions of politics and political leadership also embrace the realm and activities of those outside formal political institutions such as political parties and others. Politics are also understood as collective and cooperative attempts to further common interests or goals outside established state institutions. This implies that political activities and leadership are characterised by collective/individual organising, deliberate work on specific political/thematic issues, for example, gender justice and equality or advocacy, and not necessarily by competition and hierarchical domination of others as suggested by mainstream conceptions of politics. Feminist politics and leadership, whilst collective or communal, can be differentiated from other collective behaviour such as those of gangsters, crowds, mobs and so on.

3. Contradictions and Ambiguities. Experiences of Feminist/Women in Public Political Leadership

Women in general, and feminist political leaders in particular, face several issues, challenges, obstacles and sometimes, ambiguous experiences. These include patriarchy¹⁹ and the notion of female political leaders as helpers/helpmates and liberal political notions of politics that polarises public/private spheres as well as external indifference to local challenges. South Africa for example, is rated as a country that promote women's political leadership. This is noticeable in laws, policies and institutions of government. However, the ambiguity is that whilst legislation is progressive and some political parties endorse women's political leadership, there are policies that still disadvantage women, as it is the case in the economy. There is also sometimes a huge gap between legislation and implementation of these laws.

Byanyima suggests that there is a subtle but obvious assumption that women ought to participate as helpmates in political leadership. This assumption manifests itself through what she calls the 'deputy factor'. Byanyima says the 'deputy factor' became a norm in Uganda's political life. In almost all levels of local government there was a male chairperson and a female deputy. Most ministries had male heads, and women were appointed junior minister. Parliament had a male speaker and a female deputy speaker. Committees, independent commissions and other state institutions tended to follow a similar pattern. 'Researchers found that in local governments women deputies

hardly ever chaired sessions as the substantive chairs always made sure meetings took place when he was present.’²⁰ The post of deputy for Byanyima is sometimes presented as a ‘glorified ghetto for women, a token and nothing to demonstrate their capacities and have moved on to more powerful posts’²¹

Women politicians in Africa struggle to be heard and to be taken seriously by African governments on gender, social and economic justice in the conduct and policies of states. But at the same time they have come to realise that their government has little influence on macro-economic policies. Byanyima poignantly states this reality when she says that ‘National agendas are not entirely shaped by national leaders. Increasingly feminists have to engage with powerful decision-makers at various levels, local, national, regional and international to have an impact. Neoliberal economies are driven externally. We must understand the decisions of politicians in this context and endeavour to influence what is decided beyond our borders.’²²

International multilateral institutions and financial institutions externally shape many African governmental policies. Technical advisors from international multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, who work on economic and political concerns such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of the World Bank, the Medium Term Expenditure Framework, agriculture health, education, transport and other sectors, ‘are even less sensitive to the questions of gender justice than our own government officials.’²³ These experiences therefore require political leadership that promotes participation and includes the voices of the poor and marginalised.

Despite comprehensive advocacy for women leadership in politics in Africa and South Africa, there is subtle, broad resistance in society against women in public politics or offices. In the case study presented above, those who believed that she ought not to be the deputy president can observe this in the booing of Mlambo-Ngcuka. On the one hand, there are those who promote solidarity with women and assert women leadership. In such contexts, one of the ethically responsible things to do is to promote and create political spaces, institutions, policies and processes that enable women and men to challenge patriarchal politics.

4. How to Advance the Feminist Agenda and Political Leadership in Africa?

In several ways feminist political leadership holistically promotes the welfare of all including of those who are marginalised by contemporary mainstream conceptions of power, politics and leadership.

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These obstacles, in the words of Byanyima, can be overcome through inculcating some of the strategies she suggests below:

Being a feminist in African politics requires having a vision of an alternative world, a realist doable agenda of issues, a clear plan of how they can be achieved and a good sense of the political environment. It requires forging many alliances some of them temporary and others more enduring. It is important to understand that extent to which a party in power is ready to prioritise gender issues and not to underestimate the patriarchal attitudes of individual leaders but which can be camouflaged by politically correct feminist rhetoric. The work of an African feminist politician consists of... taking some steps forward and painfully holding back one's fire, as some gains are rolled back sometimes by allies. It involves refusing to compromise on a matter of principle and risking being abandoned on the floor of parliament and suffering public humiliation. It is about winning the trust of poor women and men and other marginalised people... A feminist politician has to be ready to pay a high price for being a voice of conscience especially when operating in an environment where politics of defending the status quo are dominant. But a lone voice or a few voices if honest, realistic, clear and consistent can be powerful and can drive change.²⁴

Feminist political leadership can also be drawn from women and men political leaders who espouse those values or norms that promote life. African leaders such as former South African President Nelson Mandela, Chief Manthatisi of the Batlokwa in Lesotho who promoted the exercise of just relationship between the led and the leaders and between communities that had before not lived peacefully with each other, are also moral leaders whose views can be tapped to promote responsible leadership. Advocacy regarding responsible leadership can also be encouraged through public insistence on ethical values such as integrity, honesty, commitment to the poor and those marginalised because of their social location (class), gender, sexuality, ethnicity/race, and which also 'deal with the sensitive issue of use, misuse and abuse of power.'²⁵

Furthermore, feminist political leadership ought to be focused on the vision beyond intra-party or state politics as defined by the notions of power and politics in liberal discourse. They ought to always be the voice of conscience and the glue that promotes critical solidarity with those whose lives and voices are made invisible. They also ought to continue challenging liberal conception of power, politics and leadership which are preoccupied with party politics, control, dominance and processes of democracy whilst undermining the content or the implications of politics on humanity and the earth. They ought to persuade African political leaders to liberate themselves from the captivity of seeing politics as an avenue of domination, competition, and hyper-insensitive masculinity in public and private spheres.

Conclusion

This essay sought to demonstrate the ambiguities of political responsibility in African politics. It has pointed out the distortion in mainstream and liberal conceptions of politics and political leadership, particularly in relation to the ideas that the content of politics is not only political power and contest, public activity and or state activities. The paper has demonstrated that the scope of politics and political leadership encompasses the public and private, men and women and both individuals and collectives. In addition, the essay highlighted that responsible political leadership in Africa also consists of models that embrace and affirm the capability, capacity and participation of women in politics. The view that the essay promotes is that responsible political leadership ought to engender gender, social and economic justice. Responsible leadership in Africa will thrive when respect, integrity and full participation by all are encouraged. This will require constant advocacy by women and men in church and in society.

NOTES

- ¹ Chopp, Rebecca, 'Methodologies', in: Russell, L. M./Clarkson, J. S. (eds), *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, p. 180.
- ² Thabo Mbeki's speeches: see South African government home page on <http://www.sagov.org>
- ³ 'Zuma's Axing a Proud Day for SA' on <http://www.iafrica.com> (last accessed 14 June 2005).
- ⁴ 'Corruption Body Hails Zuma's Sacking' on <http://iafrica.com/news/sa/950387.htm> (last accessed September 2005).
- ⁵ Mde, V., 'Scandal in Air as New Deputy Steps Up', in: *Business Day*, 9 September 2005.
- ⁶ *The Mercury*, 9 September 2005.
- ⁷ Lassman, Peter (ed.)/Speirs, Ronald (transl.), *Weber. Political Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 311, quoted in Gathaka, J. K., 'Responsible Political Leadership', in: Stückelberger, Christoph/Mugambi J.N.K. (eds), *Responsible Leadership. Global Perspectives*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005, p. 85. See also Chapter 30 in this volume.
- ⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 85.
- ⁹ See Nürnberger, Klaus, *Ethics of Political and Economic Life* (Study Guide for TEA 304f), Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1996.
- ¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 2.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ For a typology of African political leadership, refer to Mazrui, Ali, *Pan-Africanism, Democracy and Leadership in Africa. The Continuing Legacy for the New Millennium*, accessed on <http://igcs.binghamton.edu>.
- ¹⁵ Solomon, Robert. C., *Ethical Leadership, Emotions and Trust. Beyond Charisma*, Kellogg Leadership Studies Project, Center for Political Leadership and Participation, College Park, MD: University of Maryland, 1996, pp. 69-90, and on http://www.academy.umd.edu/publications/klspdocs/rsolo_p1.htm.
- ¹⁶ Bounds, E. M., 'Politics', in: Russell, L. M./Clarkson, J. S. (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 212.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁸ Burdziej, Stanslaw, 'Religion and Politics. Religious Values in the Polish Public Square since 1989', in Walters, P. (ed.), *The Keston Journal of Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 33 (2), Abingdon: Routledge Taylor and Francis, June 2005, p. 165.
- ¹⁹ The word patriarchal-kyriarchy was coined by Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza. It refers to the lordship of men over women in the sense of a master/servant relationship. It is thus an impediment to the full life of women and disables their possibilities to contributing fully as political leaders in their churches and society.
- ²⁰ Byanyima, Winnie, *Perils and Promises: Living Feminist Politics in Uganda*. A panel presentation at the African Gender Institute Panel discussion at the International Women's Day on 8 March 2004.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Kobia, Samuel, *Ecumenical and Ethical imperatives in Theological Responses to Contemporary Challenges in Africa*. An address at St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, Kenya, 13 October 2001, p. 23. See <http://www.wcc.coe.org/wcc/wht/education/mf96.pdf>.