

# SEETHINGS AND SEATINGS

## Strategies for Women's Political Participation in Asia Pacific

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**A Project of the Task Force on  
Women's Participation in Political Processes**



**APWLD**

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## MESSAGE FROM REGIONAL COORDINATOR

*Politics is not for women! Politics is dirty, full of intrigue and competition over power that cannot be handled by women who are soft, emotional, and dull. Women's place is at home; to take care of (male) politicians who come home drained by their power competitions and games. Politics is for strong men, it is a man's world!*

This is the political education we receive from our mothers, fathers, families, communities, society and states on politics.

Two phenomena are reflected from this mind-set. First, if a woman wants to enter politics, she will experience many forms of hardship and resistance. “Yes, she can be a parliamentarian if she is not neglecting her duty as a woman”, or “she has to prove herself to be capable to work until late night as the male parliamentarians do”, or “she has to have appropriate qualification”, and many other challenges. These challenges are not addressed to a man if he wants to enter candidacy, even though reality often shows that many incapable men are becoming parliamentarians through political links and not because of their capability.

Second, very few women are involved in decision making at high levels. Political decisions are determined and dominated by patriarchal mind-sets and we all know its impact on women, their families, communities, and States. This manifests in the neglect of women's rights and discrimination against women; both factors contributing to various forms of violence against women. Moreover, lack of real democracy to guarantee political participation of the majority of people has made women's access to politics more difficult. Also, women who have access to decision making at state institutions through their political links, as they are wives, daughters, nieces of politicians, usually only play the role as supporters of patriarchal politics and do not pursue the fulfillment of women's rights.

This book is about six women from Fiji, India, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia and the Philippines who entered the political arena to be involved in political decision making machineries, to influence and change political decisions, to be women's voices and fulfill women's rights. It describes their experiences and challenges in their efforts. This book is one of APWLD's efforts through its Task Force on Women's Participation in Political Processes to assist women in Asia Pacific to challenge existing political structures (such as electoral processes) and increase their representation at national and local levels; to increase the capacity of Asia Pacific women decision-makers to promote a feminist perspective and agenda in existing political processes.



Through their experiences, we are more confident that participation in politics is essential for women to change women's lives and ensure women's human rights.

Titi Soentoro  
APWLD Regional Coordinator





## FOREWORD

We live in times of extreme global inequality. “The world’s richest 500 individuals have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million. Beyond these extremes, the 2.5 billion people living on less than US\$ 2 a day - 40 percent of the world’s population - account for 5 percent of global income. The richest 10 percent, almost all of whom live in high-income countries, account for 54 percent.” (Human Development Report 2005<sup>1</sup>) Despite CEDAW and BPFAs, women remain discriminated against, marginalised and subjected to violence.

On the other hand, more people have turned to organising, education and mobilising of millions, especially at the grassroots level, to break free from poverty, defend their rights and work for peace based on justice. Women are in the midst of these peoples’ movements and initiatives. More women have joined organisations, groups and NGOs. They are active in spreading women’s orientation, agenda and perspective. They are tireless in providing services to other women. They are awesome when demonstrating on the streets, in communities, schools and workplaces.

Recently, women working for change have found a new arena to engage in - electoral and parliamentary politics. They use electoral campaigns to inform women and men on the situation of women, women’s analysis and stand on various issues and the women’s agenda and programme of action. Their campaign sorties to different parts of their country become venues for getting acquainted with local issues and meeting local women who can be organised. They file bills and resolutions in parliament towards pro-women and pro-people legislations. They give privilege speeches and call for investigative hearings. They make sure that their participation in national politics complements the basic strategies of organising-education-mobilisation of the women’s movement.

This book attempts to document the experiences of women in electoral and parliamentary politics. It is an initiative of the Task Force on Women’s Participation in Political Processes (TF-WPPP) of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). It presents the results, in case study form, of the first in a series of researches to be undertaken by the task force in its advocacy for greater women’s participation in politics. Six women - Adi Ema Tagicakibau from Fiji, Balabarathy from Tamil Nadu in India, Kim Hyen Mi from Korea, Toktokan Borombaeva from Kyrgyzstan, Zaitun Kasim

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<sup>1</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, 2005, “Tracking Human Development – excerpts from HD Report 2005”, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 25 September, p. A12.



from Malaysia and Liza Largoza-Maza from the Philippines - agreed to share their experiences in contesting elections and as members of their government's parliament or legislature.

Their experiences show that women's participation is not only a question of numbers. Women's organisations and movements have to lend some of their leaders to national politics to ensure that those women who sit in parliament or in any national government position are those who are committed to advance women's rights and welfare. The quota system for women's participation can only be effective if filled up by genuine representatives of women.

Some of the experiences also show that an election is not necessarily a process where the electorate can choose their leaders. When power, cash, stereotypes and advertising determine the results of elections, the women and other marginalised sectors hardly get a chance to win. One can have "a picture of a flawed electoral process - and therefore a 'democracy' severely constrained by elite dominance and power - in which the people participate only marginally, whereas it is the people who should be at the center of the critical task of deciding who will exercise the sovereignty that in theory they only delegate to their chosen leaders." (Querijero, 2004<sup>2</sup>)

Lastly, women's involvement in electoral and parliamentary politics is closely linked to the women's movement for change. Women leaders who have been tempered in political struggles are more able to resist cooptation by the system. Support from the women's and other movements, not only helps a lot in making the women's candidates win, but also ensure the efficacy of their being women's and people's parliamentarians.

Editorial Board, TF-WPPP  
Rashila Ramli  
Elisa Tita Lubi  
Nurgul Djanaeva

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<sup>2</sup> Querijero, N.B. 2004, *Subverting the People's Will*, Ken Inc., Quezon City.



## INTRODUCTION: SEETHINGS TO SEATINGS

Political participation is essential for all women and men in order to ensure that their rights are addressed by relevant authorities within countries of their residence. Forms of political participation may vary from state to state. However, it is important to recognise that actual levels and extent of participation of women and men working for positive change in electoral and parliamentary politics can impact on the policies, programmes, as well as activities affecting women and men in societies.

For women to effectively use law as an instrument in striving to effect changes and improve their situation, it is an important step that they gain equitable representation in the formal decision-making bodies of their countries, whether at the national, regional, local and community levels. But achieving this has proven next to impossible in our societies, especially in the Third World, where there is frequently lack of real democracy to guarantee political participation of the majority of the people and where women are discriminated against and subjected to various forms of violence. It becomes very important therefore to learn from the experiences of women who have directly engaged in electoral politics, whether they have won seats in their Parliament or government or not. Women need to share with one another lessons and strategies in using the elections and seats in government to advance women's struggle to defend their rights and achieve emancipation.

In Asia Pacific, there is approximately 11% women representation in the houses of parliament. This is a low figure compared to Nordic countries where the level of representation is 35-40%. Despite the fact that there has been a move to introduce a quota system as well as a move toward a critical mass representation in many countries, such moves have not led toward greater representation of women within the formal electoral system. Therefore, if election is viewed as a vehicle that would increase the representation of women, and subsequently addressing women's issues, then, it is necessary to examine the strategies as well as the challenges faced by women candidates in the various elections which took place in 1999-2004 in Asia-Pacific.



However, women's participation in the political process cannot be just a question of numbers and ratios but of what kind of women will represent women. Women's movements and its allies have a few among its ranks to run for elected office and gain seats in parliament or other government positions. These are the women who can be most depended upon to fight for women's rights and interests plus those of other marginalised sectors and classes in society. They are the ones who will be more formidable against being co-opted and swallowed by a monopolistic, patriarchal and unjust system. It is important that we learn from the experiences of the few who have worked in an usually corrupt and graft-ridden government.

## Genesis of a Text

The decade of the 1990s and into the new millennium can be considered as a challenging period. Countries still reel from the debt crisis that started in the 1980s and was intensified instead of solved by the conditions of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) imposed especially on the less developed countries by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). The United States calls for a New World Order that is unipolar and cognizant of its global power. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) springs out of the new GATT negotiations and becomes the international implementer and police of globalisation. The neo-liberal economic framework is discredited by the 1997 financial crisis that saw the collapse of the so-called Asian Tiger economies of Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea, along with the economic crises that befell Brazil and Argentina among others.

The whole world remains shocked by the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. Equally shocking is the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. U.S. President George W. Bush sustains his so-called "war on terror" especially against what he calls the axis of evil - Iraq, Iran and North Korea - and the Second Front, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. Added to the infamous National Security laws are the anti-terrorism bills being pushed everywhere.

On the positive side, we are witness to the acceleration in technological advancement that impacts on many forms of interactions. There are also stronger sectoral and multi-sectoral social movements that advance the rights and demands of the people, especially the more marginalised ones. National movements have linked up with one another in cooperation and solidarity. A new breed of leaders has been borne out of the social movements, and they have started engaging in electoral and parliamentary politics.

It is in the political and socio-economic context of the period that this book is conceptualised and given reality. In the political arena where countries adhere to the electoral system, citizens have the opportunity to represent



others or to be represented by others. Women are no exception. How do women candidates strategise to optimise their chances of becoming a candidate as well as their chances of winning an election? What are the driving forces that energise women to enter politics? What are the restraining forces that challenge their position in politics? These are some hard core questions that need to be answered in order to prepare more women to enter politics in the future. This is especially important if women are to create a critical mass in any organisation. The legislative body of any government is a venue where women need to have a critical mass.

The purpose of this book is to collate and compile the information pertaining to strategies utilised by electoral candidates in elections which took place since the late 1990s. A number of elections occurred in various countries throughout Asia Pacific. As such, this project has four objectives:

1. To identify the factors that make it difficult (restraining forces) for women to win in elections and to be effective in parliament or any other elective position; and those factors that helped her (driving forces);
2. To pinpoint and assess the strategies used by women candidates to win and/or meet women's objectives in the elections;
3. To assess how these women advance the women's agenda and further the cause of the women's movement during elections and while in parliament or any other elective position; and
4. To draw lessons from women's engagement in elections and work in government, and use them as a guide to future efforts at strengthening women's participation in the political process.

In order to do so, selected countries within Asia-Pacific are chosen as case studies for the purpose of analysis. These countries are Fiji, India, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia and the Philippines. The countries span the length and breadth of Asia-Pacific. Some countries are multi-ethnic (Malaysia, India and Fiji) while others may be rather homogeneous (South Korea). Some countries have a long tradition of parliamentary election while others are practicing the presidential form.

## Creative Path

This study is based on a three-pronged approach, i.e. **contextual assessment**, descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. Contextual assessment is a macro level compilation of data that will include the political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions of the country under examination. Initial literature review includes studies that have been conducted by others in each selected country. Furthermore, researchers utilise resource material collated by the Asia Pacific Forum for Women, Law and Development



(APWLD) such as information in the Collation of Laws (2001, 2002), the Report on “Sharing Experiences in Central Asia” (2002), the Report on the National Colloquium (2003), and Women and Globalisation by Titi Soentoro (2004). In the assessment, matters which are addressed are obstacles and challenges, political systems, religion and class factors, as well as other location-specific issues.

The **descriptive analysis** focuses on two aspects: First, personal background of the subject under study includes detailed background information with regard to her education and her involvement with the women’s movement leading to her active involvement into the political power structure. Second, all authors are requested to include the political setting of each country. The inclusion allows for a better contextualisation of each case study.

Finally, the **inferential analysis consists** of a documentation of strategies in which the women candidates advanced the women’s movement or were supported by the movement. The analysis includes the subject’s personal views on the strategies utilised as well as the obstacles faced by her. Furthermore, there is a need to recognise factors which had assisted her in negotiating her position within the political arena.

The three-pronged approach is dependent upon a good selection of suitable subjects. It is important for the authors to identify suitable subjects and respondents in order to allow for an in-depth discussion. Therefore, it is imperative that our subjects are women who went through the electoral process and/or have connection with the women’s movement and women’s groups.

- A woman leader who has won or lost in an election, at least at the state level
- Allies with women’s movements and organisations
- Carries women’s agenda and/or contributes to women’s agenda
- Each author also studied in great detail whether or not the respondent has been:
  - effective in Parliament - having tactical alliances, usage of press, media, family, connections to the political party;
  - utilising political machinery and financial management; and
  - developing specific strategies in her capacity to maintain her position as a political leader in her party.

The data excavation is qualitative in nature. This means authors collected their data through in-depth interviews with their subjects. An open-ended



questionnaire guideline was developed in order to ensure that all authors covered similar material. In some cases, authors observed the activities of subjects from a distance. The six countries chosen for this study are Fiji, India, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, South Korea and the Philippines. Below is a brief description of each country's emphasis.

## **Fiji**

This case study addresses the strategy employed by Adi Ema Tagicakibau in her political career in Fiji. The study reports on her background and includes an analysis of her life and education. It also analyses Ema's entry into the women's rights movement in Fiji and her reasons for entering politics. Once in politics this study examines her electoral strategies and how she was helped by the women's movement in Fiji.

For this research, seven interviews of one hour in duration were held with Ema. Additionally there was an interview with Gina Houg Lee, the Coordinator of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement at the time that Ema was in office. There was also an interview with Dr. Cokanasiga, who was the Minister for Health and a member of the Fijian Association Party. Various reports and documents were considered and analysed including contemporary news stories from the time that Ema was in office. The difficulties of drawing broad, generalised conclusions from Ema's experience are that women's experiences in Fiji differ depending on their ethnicity and class difference.

## **India**

The candidate chosen for our case study is Balabharathy. She is formerly known as Nagalakshmi and is a current Member of Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu. She contested the election of State Legislature twice. She was unsuccessful in her first attempt but won the seat in her second attempt. Her experience of participation in the election gives an understanding about the general participation of women in the electoral process. Similar to the Fijian author, the intensive interview and secondary data sources were used to delve into the strategies utilised by the candidate.

## **Korea**

The case of (South) Korea focuses on the process of how women become professional politicians. The case study is on Kim Hyen Mi (44 years old) who ran for the Central Committee of the Uri party. Kim Hyen Mi is a professional politician who became the first university graduate woman party executive. She became a lawmaker through the proportional representation after 18 years of active involvement in the party. Prior to her victory in electoral politics, she planned other people's election campaigns. She won in a



proportional representation system utilised by the party. Even though it was an election within a party, the process was very meaningful since it gave a chance to evaluate her 18-year involvement in mainstream politics and reflect on her presence and participation in the history of Korean politics. Here, based on interviews with Kim Hyen Mi and relevant people, and Kim's webpage and press reports, is shown how a South Korean woman becomes a politician and a member of the Central Committee of a political party.

## **Kyrgyzstan**

The Kyrgyz case centers on Toktokan Borombaeva. During research the following methodology was applied. The contextual assessment included the political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions of Kyrgyzstan. Review of the country's legislations related to elections and political processes, as well as social factors that affect women's participation in political processes in Kyrgyzstan was part of the study.

The descriptive analysis includes Toktokan's personal background, with focus on her political involvement and relations with women's movement leading to her ascendance into the political power structure. The inferential analysis covered strategies used by Toktokan during elections and in advancing the cause of the women's movement during the campaign. It included her personal views on the strategies utilised as well as the problems, difficulties and obstacles that she faced. Attention was paid to factors which helped her in negotiating her position within the political arena.

During research the following tools were used: numerous interviews with Toktokan, activists of the women's NGOs, members of political parties and members of the Parliament; statistical information analysis; questionnaires; work with archival data; collection and analysis of primary and secondary literature; and analysis of the campaign materials.

## **Malaysia**

Zaitun Kasim (better known as Toni) is the focus of the Malaysian case study. To research and analyse Zaitun's experiences in the context of the current discussion, three research methodologies were used. First is the qualitative approach of library research that is indispensable in putting together background data that involve the larger Malaysian election scenario, women participation in it and the gender dynamics relevant to this study. Much of the library research was based on personal library resources of both the researcher and individuals interviewed, especially those of Zaitun and Saira Shameem, newspaper archives, and the internet. Second is the series of lengthy and exhaustive interviews that Zaitun had agreed to. Saliha (the author of the case study) and Zaitun managed to squeeze in three sessions in





between Zaitun's hectic schedule with each lasting between three to four hours.

In each session they went through the editors' guidelines, sifting through details of Zaitun's thoughts, actions and lessons learnt while all the time maintaining an analytical approach of her particular experience as an election candidate. The research was much helped by Zaitun's concise and articulate style as well as a paper that she had presented in Jakarta, Indonesia, on the subject in 2004. In fact, Zaitun constantly referred the researcher to the paper as she actually had answered most of the research questions in it. Third, a short but in-depth interview was obtained with Saira, the individual who played a pivotal role in Zaitun's candidacy, being both her campaign manager and the prime mover of the Women Candidacy Initiative (WCI) which was Zaitun's core campaign machinery. The success of this interview owed much to Saira's insightful focus on what was needed for this project. (The writing was done and successfully completed around lecture schedules and other academic duties at the Political Science Programme of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia where the researcher is an Associate Professor.)

## **The Philippines**

Liza Largoza-Maza, as president and number one nominee of the Gabriela Women's Party (GWP), sits as her party's representative in the Philippine legislature. GWP is the only one of three all-women parties in the Philippines which won in the 2004 elections. Liza is also the Vice-Chairperson of GABRIELA, the largest national coalition of women's organisations in the Philippines which is composed of women workers and peasant, indigenous, urban poor and professional women. Liza exemplifies the feminist leader who is both in the women's movement and in parliamentary politics. She is the subject of this study.

Her extensive involvement in electoral politics in 2001 and 2004 provides insights to the strategies that one could utilise in an election. The researcher reviewed existing materials on Liza, the Gabriela Women's Party (GWP), GABRIELA and on Philippine politics and electoral struggles. The materials reviewed include books and magazines, pamphlets and web materials. The researcher also looked at various campaign materials and unpublished documents of the GWP. Aside from the main subject, Liza, other leaders of the women's movement and GWP were identified for interviews. Identification was based on the interviewees' knowledge of Liza, GWP, the women's movement in the Philippines, and on the landscape of Philippine economy and politics. After the review of literature, the researcher formulated interview questions based on the research objectives and framework and on the particularities of each interviewee.



The chapter on Liza will show the interplay of individual leadership, the potential of an all-women's party, the dynamism of the women's and the people's movements in the Philippines-all of them fighting for their rights, addressing both women's and people's issues, and advancing the women's and people's agenda.

## **From Seething to Seatings**

Women have always participated in politics. The political participation may be in the electoral system or otherwise. In the electoral system, there are many obstacles and challenges faced by women. On the one hand, the obstacles can bring forth frustration, anger and resentment. On the other hand, the challenges can lead to innovative ideas, character building and the discovery of hidden potentials. It is imperative that women learn from other women in order to champion women's issues especially at the national level. Thus, from the seething of labour, one can hope for more seatings in the wider realm of political representation.

The six case studies portrayed in this book will not allow us to make a generalisation on overall strategies in political participation. It will not allow for a formulation of a universalised method of participation in Asia- Pacific. It will, however, give insights to the challenges and obstacles that women face and need to overcome in different electoral systems. By having these insights, better strategies can be developed in order to cater to local situations in the future.



# FIJI: BAKING AND BASKING IN THE SUN

By Naeemah Khan

Adi Ema Tagicakibay

## Introduction

This case study addresses the strategies employed by Adi Ema Tagicakibau in her political career in Fiji. The study reports on her background and includes an analysis of her life and education. This study also analyses Ema's entry into the women's rights movement in Fiji and her reasons for entering politics, examining her electoral strategies and how she was helped by the women's movement in Fiji.

Ema's political career was successful but, ultimately, brief. It was brief due to an unsuccessful *coup d'etat* in May 2000 which was led by failed Suva businessman George Speight. However, Mr. Speight did illegally oust the democratically elected government in which Ema was a Minister and created a tense standoff which lasted nearly two months before his eventual arrest and imprisonment for life.

Ema's political career "took off" when she was elected to government in 1999 and made an Assistant Minister in the Prime Minister's office. Although the May 2000 coup meant that Ema's political career was illegally cut short, her strategies and considerable achievements provide invaluable lessons to other aspiring female politicians in Fiji. To draw broad conclusions from Ema's experience for all women in Fiji does provide a challenge. This is because of the different challenges women face due to their ethnic and/or socio-economic origins.

Although Fiji is a multiracial society, it is not a racially harmonious one. Politicians in the past and present have sought to exploit racial differences to further their own political careers and, as a result, an aspiring female politician from a different ethnic background will face different challenges than Ema. This is not to detract from Ema's success, but is included to ensure that the challenges that women from different ethnic backgrounds face are not downplayed, as they come from uniquely complex and different backgrounds.



## **Fiji: Political context/setting**

Fiji has inherited the “Westminster system” or representative system of government from the colonial period and maintained it after independence. The governance of Fiji is split into a central government, which is “supreme”, and local governments whose functions are controlled by Acts of Parliament and which fulfil an administrative function.

The Fiji Parliament is the supreme lawmaking council or assembly of central government formed by the House of Representatives made up of elected representatives and the Upper House or Senate that consists of nominated members<sup>1</sup>.

There are two types of local government: rural and urban. In urban areas these are City/Town/Municipal. Since 1997 local government consists of locally elected members nominated by their own political parties. Local government has a wide administrative function and its powers and duties are defined by Acts of Parliament. Local government may not act outside its defined powers.

In the rural areas there are two sets of administration based on ethnicity. The indigenous Fijians are administered through village, *tikina* (district) and provincial councils. At the top of the hierarchy is the Great Council of Chiefs. The Indo-Fijians are administered through advisory councils.<sup>2</sup>

## **Legislative context of Fiji’s political system**

The people who are elected into Fiji’s political system are controlled by a number of legislative provisions which include:

- The 1997 Constitution
- The Electoral system
- The Great Council of Chiefs

## **The Constitution**

There are no specific provisions in the Constitution regarding the participation of women in politics or elections.

The Constitution states that:

A person is qualified to be nominated for election if he or she is not an:

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<sup>1</sup> Vakatale Taufa. “Role of women political leaders in promoting the status of women”. In Proceedings of the Seminar on the Participation of Women in Politics as an Aspect of Human Resources Development. 18-20 November, 1992, 59-66

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*



- i) unregistered voter
- ii) undischarged bankrupt or
- iii) has an interest in an agreement or contract entered into with the government or a government authority.<sup>3</sup>

## The electoral system

The 1997 Constitution affects the electoral process mainly through the following provisions:

- i) Ethnic restrictions on voters and candidates. In the election process for members of the House of Representatives there are 71 seats in the House of which 46 are elected on reserved communal basis; 23 contested by Fijian candidates, 23 contested by Indo-Fijians, 3 by General Voters and 1 by the Council of Rotuma. For these seats the candidates and voters belong to the same ethnic category. The rest of the seats are open or common roll seats with no ethnic restrictions on voters or candidates.
- ii) Since 1999 Fiji has used the preferential or alternative voting system.<sup>4</sup> This system replaced the first-past-the-post system that Fiji had inherited.<sup>5</sup>

The language of the Electoral Act is gender neutral with no specific restrictions or favourable provisions for women to enter into politics or to participate in elections.

## The Great Council of Chiefs (GCC)

The GCC is an indigenous Fijian institution which is made up of Chiefs around Fiji. The GCC was established by the British colonial administration and has been institutionalised by the 1990 and 1997 Constitution. The GCC appoints the President and Vice-President from amongst its members.<sup>6</sup>

There are female chiefs in Fiji; however, these women may also face discrimination as Fijian culture is strongly patriarchal. Women normally rise

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<sup>3</sup> Government of Fiji. *Constitution of the Republic of the Fiji Islands*. 1998 p.41

<sup>4</sup> The preferential or alternative voting system is a type of electoral system whereby the candidate who receives more than 50% of the first preferences is declared elected. If no candidate receives an absolute majority of the first preferences, votes are relocated until one candidate has an absolute majority of votes cast. The “first-past-the-the post” is when the winning candidate is the one who wins more votes than any other candidate. (International Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance; document downloaded from <http://www.idea.int/esd/glossary.cfm> on 02/11/04)

<sup>5</sup> Lal, Brij, V, “A time to change: the Fiji general elections of 1999.” In *Fiji Before the storm: elections and the politics of development*, 2000. p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Colowai, Asenca, “Fiji Islands Report”. In *APWLD Women’s Participation in Political Processes Task Force Collation of Laws on Women’s Political Participation*, 2002, pp. 26-51.



to a chief's position if there is no male successor (although there have been exceptions).<sup>7</sup>

## Women's participation in politics

Women are generally underrepresented in decision-making positions, representing 13 percent of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in the Civil Service, 15 percent of the members of Boards of Government Statutory Bodies<sup>8</sup> and 17 percent of Legislators, senior officials and managers.<sup>9</sup> Women are overrepresented in the lower paid occupations and professions that are traditionally associated with them such as teaching and nursing. With two exceptions women did not participate in politics until after the 1987 coups. The exceptions were Adi Losalini Dovi who was the government whip in the Alliance government and Irene Jai Narayan in Opposition.

After the 1987 coups more opportunities opened up for Fijian women as they were promoted in the civil service and in donor-funded political education bodies. During this period there was mass migration of skilled Indo-Fijians, men and women alike.<sup>10</sup>

The 1992 and 1994 elections saw a small number of women elected into government who played significant roles. The 1999 elections saw eight women elected into government, the largest number ever.<sup>11</sup> In the 2001 elections the largest number of women contested the elections, however, only four were successful. Currently, there are four women in government, two have ministerial portfolios and the other two are assistant ministers.

## Case Study: Adi Ema Tagicakibau

### BIOGRAPHICAL

#### Childhood/Education

Adi Ema Golea ("Ema") was born on 28 October 1958, in Somosomo, Taveuni. She was the fourth of seven children. Her father Ratu Vakamino Golea had been a schoolteacher and her mother Vika Sorokibau was a nurse. They lived in the village of Somosomo on the island of Taveuni where her

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<sup>7</sup> Vakatale note 11 supra.

<sup>8</sup> Fiji Bureau of Statistics. *Bureau of Statistics Statutory Bodies Gender and Race Analysis Fiji*. 2004.

<sup>9</sup> \_\_\_\_\_. *Fiji Population Census Report*. 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Reddy, Chandra, "Women in Politics in Fiji". In *Fiji Before the Storm: Elections and the politics of development*, 2000, pp. 149-158

<sup>11</sup> Colowai note 15 supra.



father had a copra farm. Her father was of a chiefly background<sup>12</sup> and a strong Christian. The family belonged to the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church and Ema grew up with strong Christian values. Her father encouraged all his daughters in education.

Ema spent her childhood in her village and attended Somosomo District School. The family religion set them apart from the rest of the village and there were a lot of activities that they couldn't attend due to their religious beliefs. The Sabbath began on Friday evenings and lasted until Saturday evening. Ema's family was cut off from cultural obligations and her father believed that the cultural obligations of indigenous Fijians was financially draining and that more resources and time should be concentrated on farming activities.

Ema's father was a strong influence on her and she says that many of his ideas and values shaped her beliefs. Through her father's beliefs she inherited an understanding of equality. She remembers him saying to her that "in God's eyes people are all equal: it is us human beings that make-up the differences". As a child she questioned practices that she felt were discriminatory. Her father was also compassionate and maintained friends and dealings with people of other ethnic backgrounds.

Ema had many debates with her father, which is uncommon in indigenous Fijian culture, as children traditionally are not allowed to talk back to their elders, especially fathers. Her father was "a very political man" and his interest in politics sparked Ema's interest. She recalls that during her childhood her father would always listen to radio programmes with discussions on political issues. Thus, Ema grew up politically aware.

Ema attended the Adi Cakobau Secondary School, an all-girls boarding school in suburban Suva, on the main island of Viti Levu. In secondary school Ema was influenced by female role models and she cites some students who are in senior positions in Government today. (One of her teachers, Ms. Taufu Vakatale, later became a Minister for Education/Women and Assistant Prime Minister.) These women strongly influenced Ema's beliefs.

Ema studied for a Diploma in Education at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Ema became politically active while at University and protested against nuclear testing on the Murorua Atoll in French Polynesia. She was

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<sup>12</sup> "Chiefly background" means that traditionally power in Fiji was held by its chiefs. Fiji is divided into provinces each with its own group of leaders/chiefs who belong to a clan. The system still exists despite the introduction of constitutional democracy to Fiji. Today in Fiji chiefs still retain power and influence. A person who belongs to a chiefly clan has the title of *Ratu* (male) and *Adi* (female).



involved in many other protests including protests for better student allowances and protests against the Ministry of Education policy of not allowing diploma holders to teach. The lecturers at the time were a strong influence on their students as they were radical and encouraged political activism.

## **Early work**

Following graduation Ema taught at Bucalevu Secondary School in Taveuni. Here she worked with an exemplary head teacher who provided good leadership and training. This was important, as it was her first exposure to the job market. The head teacher also encouraged volunteerism, encouraging teachers and staff members to do community work.

After three years Ema was transferred to Saqani Junior School in a remote rural area on Vanua Levu. This was “a challenge” and contributed significantly to her character development. Ema developed resilience, tolerance and the ability to adapt to different environments. The school and surrounding area lacked resources and proper infrastructure. Ema observed that it was the women from the village who ran the school and ensured that the school was always supplied with water and even fundraising in times of need to hire carpenters and providing them with meals while they worked.

Ema married a fellow schoolteacher, Seremaia Tagicakibau. In 1986, her husband was offered a scholarship to study at USP and they moved to Suva. She was posted to Wainibuka Secondary School outside Suva. Her husband lived in Suva and Ema, who had had her first child by then, lived in Wainibuka. Following the 1987 coup, as the area became unsafe, Ema relocated to Suva where she commenced teaching at Ballantine Secondary School.

## **Further studies**

Ema pursued further studies by distance education. After teaching for two more years, she attained a scholarship to USP to study for a Bachelor of Arts Degree majoring in History/Politics and Language. She juggled schoolwork with her family life. By then she had had her second child.

During her undergraduate studies Ema became drawn to feminist ideology. She was introduced to ‘gender issues’ in the history/politics courses. The women’s movement in Fiji was becoming increasingly vocal in the media and she had feminist lecturers who influenced her. Ema feels that she was naturally drawn to feminist ideas and values due to her inherent beliefs and upbringing.

Ema continued at USP doing a Post Graduate Diploma in Development Studies. Ema concentrated on research on rural women and rural issues. Ema





then moved to Monash University in Melbourne, Australia where she did her masters thesis in Women's Studies on a scholarship from the Australian Government (AusAID). This was the first time that Ema had travelled overseas. She experienced the political activism of students in Australia and also of people from other countries especially from neighbouring Asian countries who were studying there. Through her studies and through interacting with fellow students Ema realised that women's experiences from around the world were similar. Although issues may be slightly different women shared a common experience of oppression and inequality.

Ema shed her inhibitions and the knowledge and experience she gained drew her closer and entrenched in her the values of equality and human rights. Ema graduated in 1995 with a Masters Degree in Women Studies.

### **Political will**

In 1995 Ema returned to Fiji and joined the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) as the centre's new development officer. FWCC is a non-government organisation that provides counselling and support for women and children survivors of violence. This was Ema's entry into the women's movement in Fiji. Whilst at FWCC Ema learnt a lot about lobbying and advocacy.

Two years later Ema joined the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) as a legal rights training officer. FWRM concentrates on legal reform and advocacy for women. Ema learnt about issues of women's human rights and conducted awareness-raising of women's legal rights at the grassroots level. While she was employed at FWRM the Fijian Association Party (FAP) approached her to join the political party in order to stand for elections in 1999. Ema resigned from her position from FWRM and was assured that there would be a place for her if she wanted to rejoin the organisation.

### **Entry into politics**

Ema was approached by the FAP as the party recognised that she would be a good candidate due to her work in the women's movement.

The FAP is a party comprised of indigenous, mostly educated professional Fijians. FAP was established in the early 1990s by Fijians opposed to the government. In 1999 FAP's leader was a seasoned woman politician, the late Adi Quini Speed. FAP understood that women added different dimensions to various issues and created an equal balance in the party's policies/manifesto.

Ema agreed to be considered by FAP because she felt that her background, skills and knowledge would allow her to contribute to the development of Fiji and for the advancement for equal opportunities for women. However,



though passionate about politics, Ema would not have entered politics but for the approach by the FAP.

Ema also became involved with the Women in Politics in the Pacific Centre (WIPPAC) in 1998. This is an informal umbrella body whose focus is on networking, training, media and research for women in politics in the Pacific.<sup>13</sup> The Fiji National Council for Women was the implementing body; the Fiji Women in Politics (WIP) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Pacific acted as the secretariat of WIPPAC. In 1998 WIPPAC organised a workshop for women about 6 months before the elections. This was for women who were going to contest the elections in 1999 and out of this a Women's Caucus was formed.

Ema succeeded at the 1999 election and became an Assistant Minister in the Prime Minister's Office. However, she was unable to complete her term as on 19 May 2000, the Government was overthrown by a coup. Ema was in Parliament the day of the takeover and was taken hostage for 10 days when she was released to attend her sister's funeral. The coup ended the People's Coalition Government.

At the 2001 elections Ema stood as a candidate as a matter of principle and out of loyalty to her ailing Party leader Adi Kuini Speed. Ema and her party were aware that the odds were against them as the political climate was very different from 1999. In 2001 in particular, and as a result of the May 2000 coup, voters had become more starkly divided along racial lines. The atmosphere was fiercely nationalistic as a result of the ethnic tensions which surfaced in the coup. The electorate had become more pessimistic and apprehensive<sup>14</sup>. As a consequence the voter turnout was low and incidence of invalid votes was high. The reason for the high incidence of invalid votes is not known, although two mooted possibilities are ballot papers "spoilt" in protest and "vote rigging".

In addition, the political alliances formed in 1999 no longer existed and politics had become more confrontational. The People's Coalition of which FAP was a part of became fractured with prominent members leaving the Coalition. The agreements of vote transfers and sharing of preferences which had been in place for the 1999 elections were no longer there.

The fracturing of political parties was not limited to any particular political group. The May 2000 coup had allowed so many issues to bubble to the surface that indigenous Fijian parties too were caught up in internal conflict

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<sup>13</sup> United Nation Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), *Pacific Women: Getting into Politics: Fiji as a best practice case study*, 1999, pp. 7-22.

<sup>14</sup> Lal B.V. "In George Speight's shadow: Fiji General Elections of 2001" in *The Journal of Pacific History* Vol, 37.1 2002 pp. 87-101.



and there was dismay at the large number of parties with “divergent and sometimes diametrically opposed agendas”.<sup>15</sup> In this changed political climate Ema still stood as she felt that her party had “unfinished business”. Her campaign in 2001 was low key and financially constrained as she had been out of a job since the coup. This time, in this changed political climate, Ema was not successful.

### **Ema’s current plans**

Ema presently has no plans to re-enter politics. There are three main reasons for Ema’s decision to remain outside politics at this time. First, Ema has had a bad experience in which she was taken hostage. Ema describes this experience as a “baptism of fire”. Secondly, Ema does not feel that in the present political climate her views and contribution would be appreciated. Ema reported that for her there was no point in being in politics for the sake of it. Ema acknowledges that she could seek an entry as part of the current ruling party but that her views and way of working to get results would not be considered or appreciated; in particular, Ema feels that politics in Fiji at the moment is very adversarial and divisive with emphasis on ethnicity and not on issues. Thirdly, Ema is disillusioned with the political climate and is disinclined to participate in a system which she feels has been tarnished by the illegality of the May 2000 coup.

Ema currently works for the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC) which is a regional NGO established to consolidate the work against nuclear testing in Pacific. She is the assistant director of Peace and Disarmament Desk/Peace and Disarmament Coordinator. The organisation is lobbying to close down all types of military activity in the region, eg, American military bases, missile tracking stations that are in the South Pacific region and other military-based issues. For instance, the current issue is the military recruitment of Fijians to Iraq and Kuwait and the British Army. She also works in peace-building and conflict prevention with women and youth groups. Her aim is to create awareness of the importance of conflict prevention and she plans to increasingly involve traditional chiefs/leaders in this work.

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<sup>15</sup> Lal note supra 21.



# Baking and Basking

## Pre-Election

### Personal Strategies

#### i) Making contact with people

In her 1999 campaign Ema concentrated on getting recognition amongst her constituents. Ema was contesting the Tamavua / Laucala Fijian Communal Seat. This is an urban seat in a densely populated area. Ema was running against two men, both of whom were well-known. One of these men was the sitting minister from the ruling Fijian political party and the other a prominent Methodist minister.

Ema targeted squatter settlements and low-income housing areas of her constituency. Ema's personal contact with the voters was effective because her constituents learnt who she was while she learnt the issues the voters faced. Ema was reported to have worn out a pair of shoes on "foot patrol", going door-to-door meeting her constituents.<sup>16</sup>

This strategy saved money. Ema was on a shoe string budget and was unable to advertise in the media. For Fiji Ema's strategy was a unique way of campaigning as most (especially male) candidates met constituents in party organised political rallies. Ema was well received by the community and succeeded in her aim to show her future constituents that she was "accessible" for them.

#### ii) Utilising her knowledge and experience

During her campaign Ema drew upon her work experience in the women's movement to formulate her personal manifesto. She spoke on poverty issues and the need for economic empowerment and education of women and what her party would do to further these issues.

Ema's background in the NGO community gave her an advantage over her peers as she had had direct experience with the media and in public speaking. Ema said the NGO background assisted her because:

- She was in touch with the difficulties and issues people were facing including socio-economic and social justice issues.
- She was assisted by her prior lobbying and advocacy roles.

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<sup>16</sup> Lal note supra 21.



- She had experience of the types of policies/laws and other changes needed to address the issues in the human rights and development context.
- She was able to show audiences that she could provide possible solutions that would work for everyone.
- She possessed communication skills to deal with the media including writing press releases and appearing before audiences.
- She was able to anticipate questions frequently asked by those who, like her, were from NGO backgrounds.

Overall, Ema said that at every step she used knowledge and experience gained as a women's rights activist and rural school teacher. Ema's background made the constituents feel that she was in touch with their needs. Ema's knowledge, experience and her background could be seen as the cake resulting from a successful baking.

### **iii) Utilising her existing networks**

Ema acknowledged the importance of drawing on existing networks to enter politics. Ema took practical steps, for example:

- Ema expressed a preference for a seat where her background would appeal to constituents.
- She cultivated her friendship with a local journalist and secured wide coverage of her campaign. Ema said that this was a positive influence on voters and was important to her success.<sup>17</sup>
- Ema used her other contacts in the media to secure extensive coverage.

### **iv) Utilising opportunities**

The utilisation of opportunities was crucial due to Ema's limited budget. To make the most of her limited resources Ema organised small rallies with her running mate (an FAP candidate who was contesting a different seat in the same constituency). This enabled both candidates to pool their resources.

Ema took every opportunity to meet her constituents. For example, she was approached by an ex-prisoners group and a youth group to organise a public debate between her and her two opponents. Ema agreed to this suggestion, organised a venue, and paid for refreshments.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



#### v) **Provide an alternative**

Ema's campaign theme was "it's time for a change".<sup>18</sup> This strategy was also deployed by the People's Coalition. Ema's political party was part of the People's Coalition and the coalition attacked and criticised the policies of the ruling party as well as providing workable alternatives.

The Coalition and particularly the Fiji Labour Party highlighted "bread and butter" issues of employment, better health, education and social welfare, and this hit a nerve with the people.<sup>19</sup> FAP had a similar message. The "it's time for a change" theme was very effective as the political climate was such that people were looking for an alternative. This was because amongst other things at the time:

- There was high unemployment;
- Crime had increased;
- Infrastructure problems including the roads and water supplies;
- Further redundancies were threatened in the public service and in the garment industry; and
- Mismanagement and corruption scandals had engulfed the government and there was dissatisfaction about the way the scandals had been handled.

#### **Driving Forces**

##### (i) **"Personal is political"**

Ema believed that she had "something to offer" her constituents and women in Fiji. Ema's study of feminism and development issues as well as her work experience made her qualified to participate in politics. Her initial interest in politics was based on what she could do for women and her views meant that she should enter politics. Ema's view is that women who are sensitive to gender and equality issues should participate in politics because

- In too many cases skilled and professional women tend to shy away from politics
- If you want a government which works towards equality for women then you should enter the public domain and make your voice heard.

Ema's campaign message and her personal manifesto stemmed from her strong belief that "personal is political". She stated in an interview that if

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Lal note 14 supra.



“women are concerned about water, housing, the cost of education and having food on the table, then we have to care about politics and be involved in it”.<sup>20</sup>

## **(ii) Women in Politics (WIP) and Women’s Caucus**

WIP was the driving force behind most of the women candidates. WIP provided technical assistance, training and moral support during the 1999 elections.

The Women’s Caucus was set up about 6 months before the 1999 elections with the aim of providing technical assistance and support for all the women candidates. Ema received training on the new voting system (alternative voting) system that Fiji began to use in 1999. WIP also provided training on how to run a campaign. Ema like the rest of the women candidates received valuable assistance on how to run an effective and organised campaign. Ema cited the following assistance which was particularly useful:

- Training on how to formulate a personal profile based on what the voter would want to know;
- The women candidates were given access to office facilities which was of great assistance to Ema due to her limited resources;
- The WIP training included preparing the Women’s Caucus for the campaign including logistical preparation and
- Financial support.

However, a shortcoming of the WIP was that it was not sustainable. The person in charge of the programme was also a candidate herself and when she lost the election she also lost interest in the WIP programme. This led to a weakening of the organisation and lack of support for women candidates in 2001.

## **(iii) Faith**

Ema had a quiet confidence that she would succeed. Her religious beliefs provide guidance and support in difficult times. Her faith and confidence also stems from her cultural heritage. She views herself as a leader as she is from a chiefly background and felt that she should use her status for the betterment of her people.

In a report by UNIFEM Ema stated that the reason for her success is “It came from my faith in God and faith in myself...”.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The Fiji Times, *Activist wants changes*, February 10, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> UNIFEM note 19 supra



## **Constraints**

### **i) Lack of financial resources**

In order to run an effective media campaign in Fiji Ema estimates that it is necessary to spend \$FJD20, 000 (about US\$ 12,000). Ema was on a limited budget and she was required by her political party to contribute \$FJD2, 000 (about US\$1,200) which she paid in instalments.

Ema was financially constrained as she had resigned from her job and did not have a regular source of income. Her husband was at that time studying overseas and there was minimal financial support from the political party.

### **ii) People's expectations**

Ema dealt with varying expectations, for example, when she was meeting people there would be questions which she could not answer which referred to her party manifesto. Some constituents believed that if they voted for Ema and she made it to government then she would be responsible for paying their expenses, eg, school fees and electricity bills.

Ema found that different groups of people have different expectations. Ema's constituency covered a large area in which there were high income groups and lower-income groups including squatter settlements. Ema targeted the lower-income groups as her aim was to work for those who were most marginalised and vulnerable.

### **iii) Political party**

Ema found that she needed to question the party manifesto. For example the manifesto contained a policy that the party would assist indigenous Fijians in acquiring work permits for overseas countries. Ema felt that this was not a viable policy and asked to have it removed from the manifesto.

Ema had to balance her personal policies with her party's policies and those of the Coalition. Although they were some shared views she had to decide where her views should take priority over other views.

### **iv) Fiji's political climate**

Ema found that Fiji's political climate is an important factor with regard to political success in Fiji. The Fijian people tend to vote along party lines. The 1999 elections results were largely based on the way political parties shared preferences.

Although issues and campaigns do contribute, success is dependent on the party one belongs to and how the party fares in the political set-up. It depends on which parties are able to gain support and share preferences. According to a UNIFEM report "for many of the women candidates their





defeat was not in the way they ran their campaign but in the parties and coalitions they belonged to and the distribution of preferences”.<sup>22</sup>

Ema’s success was partly due to her political party being part of the People’s Coalition. In the first count of the votes in the 1999 election the SVT candidate and sitting minister at the time had the most votes and Ema had the second most number of votes. The candidate with the least votes was from *Veitokani Ni Lewenivanua Vakaristo* (VLV) party and, under a prior agreement with FAP, the votes for the VLV party transferred to FAP pushing Ema into first place.

The practice of vote sharing worked against Ema when she contested the 2001 elections as the political climate had changed and there was a different sharing of preferences.

### **Post-Election**

The FAP won 11 of the 23 Fijian communal seats after the 1999 elections. The Fiji Labour Party won the majority of seats and FAP was one of the parties invited to form a government with them. FAP received three ministerial portfolios; Ema was given the portfolio of Assistant Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office.

The People’s Coalition government was in power for a year before they were removed by the May 2000 coup. Therefore, it is difficult to properly analyse Ema’s work in parliament as she was not in government long enough.

In an interview with Gina Houng Lee, who was the Coordinator of the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement in 1999, she recalls that Ema was very supportive of women’s issues during her time in parliament; however, in terms of concrete examples, it was hard to state any because Ema was not in parliament long enough to have made any significant impact.

### **Personal Strategies while in power**

As an Assistant Minister, Ema used the following strategies to implement her priority issues or the promises she had made.

#### **i) Individual lobbying**

Ema actively supported motions made in parliament on issues that concerned women/policies/bills that would work towards improving women’s unequal status or would improve the situation of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

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<sup>22</sup> UNIFEM note 19 supra.



For example, with regard to the Family Law Bill, Imrana Jalal, who was the Family Law Commissioner and some of the members of parliament (MPs) were against this. From her experience Ema knew that MPs could be very disruptive and many were in the habit of passing loud remarks and catcalls when they did not agree with what a speaker was saying in parliament.

She decided that instead of publicly confronting them, she would lobby them individually. She approached them individually during parliamentary breaks and after work. She felt this approach was effective as they would give Ema a chance to voice her opinions and not become confrontational.

Most MPs (male and female) generally have no formal gender training and male MPs tend to be fairly confrontational if they feel that certain issues or opinions are disturbing the patriarchal status quo.

## **ii) Applied her knowledge and experience**

When making submissions she addressed the issue by explaining how it would affect people socio-economically, always speaking in terms of how it would affect the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and women and children.

Ema was complimented on her analytical skills and her ability to provide a holistic analysis of issues in interviews with Dr. Cokanisiga (acting leader of FAP) and by Ms. Houng Lee. In her submissions on the issue of the introduction of gaming machines she stated the effects of gambling on the family (especially women and children) and also on those in lower income groups.

Ema also undertook the initiative of conducting a gender audit of all government ministries in order find out how the budget allocation benefited individual ministries. She conducted this survey with the aim of using this knowledge in the planning of the budget the government would be preparing.

One of the major tasks allocated to Ema was to compile a list of government contracts awarded and look at government properties and find out what their needs were with regard to their maintenance. When doing these tasks she applied her knowledge and experience. As a teacher in rural schools she was aware of the conditions of rural schools and the infrastructure. She planned to have resources allocated to the improvement of rural infrastructure.

## **iii) Set an example**

Ema did not compromise her beliefs while in Parliament and stood her ground on the issues she believed in and always endeavoured to set an example.



In her NGO background she had preached good governance and criticised government. Therefore she tried not to repeat the mistakes of her predecessors. For example Ema chose not to purchase a new car, despite most of her fellow MP's taking up preferential offers from car dealerships, as it was important to her that she remain the person she was before she became an MP.

This may seem minor, but Ema was determined to uphold a standard she had demanded of politicians as a women's'- rights activist. Her aim was to not repeat the 'bad behaviour' of past politicians.

### **Driving Forces**

#### **i) A Purpose**

Ema's purpose was to meet the expectations of the people that had elected her. She felt that she had something to prove as a new MP and as a woman.

Ema's view is that in order to work towards eliminating discrimination against women; they need to become involved in politics. Ema thought that she had to utilise her position in every way possible to achieve her goal. She applied this in all the tasks that were allocated to her in accordance with the portfolio she held.

#### **ii) Her identity and faith**

Ema felt that her cultural heritage was a major driving force for her and though she was from a chiefly background she was also established in her own right. This provided her with a confidence that allowed her to negotiate her position within the political arena.

It allowed her to gain the respect of her peers and voters. Dr. Cokanisiga commented that Ema was not only from a chiefly background but also well qualified academically. Her family had no political ties and she achieved her position on her own merit.

Ema identified her deep faith in God again as a driving force for her and assisted in her remaining "grounded".

### **Restraining forces**

#### **i) Balancing interests**

In government, Ema had to mediate between the interests of her party, the Coalition and also her own beliefs. She kept in mind the interests of her constituents and the promises she had made when campaigning.

On occasion the behaviour and conduct of MPs came into conflict with Ema's beliefs. For example, when an MP from the Labour Party attacked the



FWCC in a manner which Ema felt was inappropriate, Ema had to remain diplomatic so as to avoid criticisms of in-fighting.

Ema's experience illustrates certain realities of politics. A woman can get elected but how much influence she wields within the government depends on many factors including which political party she belongs to, how much power/influence the party has, and how much power the woman has within her party.

Ema was new to politics and her party was a minor partner in the Coalition government; therefore, she was forced to find innovative ways of pushing her agenda through.

## **ii) Party politics**

Party politics was a major restraining force for Ema. After the FLP won the majority of the seats there were problems between the FLP and FAP, with regards to who was to be the Prime Minister. A lot of the discussions that took place were just between the party leaders of the two parties.

Within the FAP Ema felt that there were problems, eg, there was no consultation within the party to discuss which elected candidate was interested in which portfolio. Ema felt that it was wrong that no meeting was called to discuss the FAP options/nominations for the Senate or who would be allocated which portfolio. She draws a connection with these failures within the party politics and the conflict that arose later within FAP and the fact that some of the disgruntled members of FAP were implicated in the May 2000 coup.

Ema thinks that the party alienated the rural Fijian voters by not giving the rural MPs a ministerial portfolio. The three that received ministerial portfolios had all won urban seats. This lack of foresight by the FAP led to problems later.

## **iii) 'Culture of the civil service'**

A challenge she constantly faced was working with a civil service that seemed to be biased. For any task to be effectively carried out the co-operation of the civil service was required. There was a certain level of resentment towards the Indo-Fijian Prime Minister from senior civil servants.

Ema's first task was to compile a list of government contracts. In carrying out this task she experienced a lack of co-operation from certain departments and those in charge became defensive. They felt that the Prime Minister was on a 'witch-hunt' and was planning to remove those he saw as being loyal to the past government. Additionally, her government had to work within the past



government's budget for at least six months. Requests that were not in the budget had to be turned down by ministries.

Ema learnt the lesson that the processes within government and the workings of the civil service could hinder the delivery of campaign promises. There was a lot of pressure from the community for results. However, the Coalition government had to work within a system that had inherited problems from the previous administration.

#### **iv) Demand on time**

The demands for Ema's time from her constituents, her Parliamentary duties, and the invitations that she received as an MP increased the challenge of her job.

Almost every day before and after work some of Ema's constituents came to her home. Some were unaware of the role she played and she had to explain. She felt that some had misguided expectations of her, requesting financial assistance.

Ema had a young family and while she had house help she missed spending time with her young children.

#### **v) Political climate**

The year Ema was in government was a difficult year as the government faced many obstacles and opposition due to people's perception of the FLP being an Indo-Fijian party. There was a view that the Indo-Fijian Prime Minister, Mr. Mahendra Chaudhary, was marginalising the interests of the indigenous Fijians and Ema experienced the non-cooperation of the civil service due to resentment towards the FLP and the Prime Minister.

On May 19 2000, a group of gunmen led by George Speight entered parliament and held the Prime Minister and his government hostage. Ema was in parliament at the time and she recalls a sense of disbelief at what was taking place. This incident led to the overthrow of the People's Coalition government.

The May 2000 coup occurred on the pretext of conserving the rights of the indigenous Fijians but the real picture is more complex. The reasons and possible reasons behind the May 2000 coup are beyond this paper. However, the 2000 coup showed that the issue of race was easily used in order to gain the support of certain sections of the community to disrupt the democratic process of government. Further, the coup, as with all identity-based politics, led to the sidelining of vital development issues such as women's rights.



## Summary and conclusions

Ema learnt many things about herself and the political process in Fiji. Above all, Ema discovered that her background in NGO's gave her an advantage over her peers as she knew the issues that faced the electorate. Additionally, the skills she had learnt working for NGOs stood her in good stead in politics.

Practically Ema learnt that she was able to run a successful election campaign without large resources and without prior experience as a politician.

Ema attributes her success to many factors including her strong sense of identity, ethics, belief in equality, interest in politics and educational background provided to her as a result of her upbringing and her father's guidance. Ema's educational background with its strong emphasis on academic success and further study assisted her to grasp the complexities and issues that politics involves.

Ema learnt that an approach which targeted the most vulnerable sections of the community and the provision of workable alternatives assisted in her effective communication with her constituents. Ema's success in communicating with her constituents was also assisted by her ability and willingness to meet her constituents face to face and in turn was influenced through the confidence given by her academic background and work experience with NGOs. Ema's standing with her own people and her status as being from a chiefly background also assisted Ema as in many sections of the community her personal status assured that she would be treated with respect, listened to and trusted.

Although many factors influenced Ema's success and Ema herself possesses many innate qualities that make her a good candidate and politician, Ema was entirely new to politics and had no prior experience in running an election campaign. Therefore the support of the WIP was invaluable. This support helped in getting Ema over the universal hurdle for all women who enter politics, ie, the lack of assistance and training in campaigning and funding.<sup>23</sup>

Ema's experience shows that an effective and sustainable programme to facilitate women's entry into politics should be established. In Ema's case the effectiveness of WIP faltered when the co-ordinator of the programme was not elected. Any future programme should ensure the sustainability and credibility of the programme. Some of the difficulties that would be expected

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<sup>23</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union. *Participation of women in political life: an assessment of developments in national parliaments, political parties, governments & inter-parliamentary unions, 5 years after the conference*, 1999 pp. 44-46.



for women in politics were minimised by Ema's chiefly background and status in the Fiji context.

However, Ema's case study highlights that achieving political office is only half the battle. Some of the difficulties that she experienced while in office included the machinery of government, party politics, and demands on her time. They illustrate the need for support of women politicians by the women's movement while they are in power. The lack of contact and cooperation with public and women's organisations is generally cited as an obstacle for women in politics.<sup>24</sup>

It is vital for women MP's to form a caucus within Parliament. This strategy has been used worldwide to provide logistical support for women during elections and act as a pressure group in Parliament.<sup>25</sup>

Fiji's political system and culture is strongly patriarchal. Ema's strategies for coping and succeeding in this entrenched context provide valuable lessons. Ema herself did not engage in confrontational politics but lobbied on a personal level. This strategy proved to be effective for Ema and is a proven strategy for women politicians who have used moderate behaviour and targeted lobbying when presenting their opinions and positions so that they do not conflict with societies' traditions.<sup>26</sup>

Fiji presents many political difficulties and obstacles for a woman politician. Among these are the cultural and traditional notions relating to women in decision making roles. The prevalence of identity based politics, ie, people organising themselves politically based on the 'sameness' of identity (in Fiji it is ethnicity)<sup>27</sup>, is an added obstacle as it divides people along ethnic lines and sidelines issues of women's rights. Identity based politics has also led to three coups all within recent memory and which set back the progress made by women's organisations in highlighting equality and human rights issues.

This case study shows that, despite the numerous obstacles faced by women in Fiji, with the requisite skills and knowledge combined with the right approach and assistance from the women's movement, success is possible. The lessons of Ema's experience and approach provide invaluable lessons

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<sup>24</sup> Shvedova, Nadezhda. "Obstacles to women's participation in parliament" In *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, 1998 p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Lovenduski, Joni & Karma, Azza. "Women in Parliament: making a difference" In *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, 1998 p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> Abu-Zayd, Gehan. "In search of political power – women in parliament in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon" In *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, 1998, p. 50.

<sup>27</sup> Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development (APWLD). 2003. *Gender and Identity-Based Politics: Workshop Organised by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development 30 July – 1 August 2002, Bali, Indonesia*. P. 7.



and pointers to women aspiring to public office. Ema's experience also shows that further work needs to be done to provide support for women in politics. In particular, there should be a sustainable and organised women's support network which will assist women before and after achieving office.

In the course of the research for this chapter Ema cited extremist political views dominated by issues like nationalism and race as the main threats to good political policy. The practise of politics dominated by men with agendas blinds gender issues and obscures the transfer of uncorrupted policy to the electorate. Breaking the agenda of entrenched politics presents the biggest hurdle for women to enter politics. Basking in the sun is not the goal of women activists. It is essential that women continue an organised and well planned battle against extremist political views and its effect of sidelining progressive issues for women's rights.

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# INDIA: FROM SARI TO NATIONAL PURSUITS

By D. Geetha



Balabarathy

India is a country where democratic practices have been in place since its independence in 1947. Elections take place from national to the village level. In all these elections, women play their parts as voters and supporters. However, not many women are willing to enter politics in a more active manner, despite the fact that there are political parties headed by women. This chapter will focus on the active participation of Balabarathy in electoral politics and her rich experience as a State Legislator. Through her involvement and dedication, there are many lessons that one can learn in the struggle to ensure that women's voices are heard and issues raised at various decision-making levels.

## History of Elections in India

The Government of India Act of 1919 introduced elections in India. Until then, the Presidency was governed by the Statutes of British Parliament. The power to legislate was in place prior to 1919; however, the government in power nominated the Council of Members. The elected Legislative Council was introduced only by the Act of 1919.

The Government of India Act of 1935 came up with wider legislative powers for elected members of the Legislatures. The Act provided for an All-India Federation. Its constituent units were the Governor's Provinces and the Indian States. The Federal Legislature consisted of two Houses, the House of Assembly called the Federal Assembly and the Council of States. The Federal Assembly had 375 members, 125 being representatives of the Indian States, nominated by the Rulers. The term of the Assembly was fixed at five years. The Council of States was a permanent body not subject to dissolution, but one-third of the members had to retire every three years. It had 260 members: 104 representatives of Indian States, 6 to be nominated by the Governor-General, 128 to be directly elected by territorial communal constituencies and 22 to be set apart for smaller minorities, women and depressed classes.



The Act established a bicameral Legislature in the Province of Madras, as it was then called. The Legislature consisted of the Governor and the two Chambers, called the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly. The Legislative Council was a permanent body not subject to dissolution but with one-third of its members thereon retired every three years. It consisted of not less than 54 members. The Legislative Assembly consisted of 215 members of which, 146 were elected from general seats of which 30 seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes, 1 for Backward areas and tribes, 28 for Mohammedans, 2 for Anglo-Indians, 3 for Europeans, 8 for Indian Christians, 6 for representatives of commerce, industry, etc., 6 for landholders, 1 for university, 6 for representatives of labour, 8 for women of which 6 were general. These provisions made in the 1935 Act provided for reservation of seats for women in both the Union and State Legislatures.

## Post Independence

After independence India chose to practice a constitutional democracy with a parliamentary system of government. The power was divided between the Parliament (or Legislature), the Executive and the Judiciary. The Parliament consists of the President and two Houses known as Council of States and the House of the People popularly known as Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, respectively. India is a Federal State with a Union Government at the centre headed by the Parliament. The Country is divided into 28 States and 7 Union Territories headed by the Legislature. The Members of the House of People and Members of the State Legislatures are elected directly by the people. There is a third body of Government, namely, the Panchayat or the local body Governance, which is at the village, municipal and district level.

## Electoral System

Elections to the Lok Sabha, the State Legislative Assemblies and the Local Bodies are carried out by an independent Election Commission. The Members to the Lok Sabha, State Legislature and the Local Body are directly elected by the people using the first-past-the-post electoral system.

The electoral system in India is based on the principle of universal adult suffrage; that any citizen over the age of 18 can vote in an election (before 1989 the minimum age was 21). The right to vote is irrespective of caste, creed, religion or gender. Those who are deemed unsound of mind and people convicted of certain criminal offences are not allowed to vote.

Any Indian citizen who is registered as a voter and is over 25 years of age is allowed to contest elections to the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies or the Local Body. For the Rajya Sabha the minimum age limit is 30 years.



Candidates for the Rajya Sabha and Vidhan Sabha should be a resident of the same state as the constituency from which they wish to contest.

Every candidate has to make a deposit of Rs. 10,000/- (about US\$ 220) for Lok Sabha election and 5,000/- (about US\$ 110) for Rajya Sabha or Vidhan Sabha elections, except for candidates from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who pay only half of these amounts. The deposit is returned if the candidate receives more than one-sixth of the total number of valid votes polled in the constituency. Nominations must be supported by at least one registered elector of the constituency, in the case of a candidate sponsored by a registered Party, and by ten registered electors from the constituency, in the case of other candidates.

India has a system of reservation enabling candidates from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes<sup>1</sup> to participate in the electoral system and have representation in the body of governance by reserving constituencies. People from these communities alone can contest elections from these constituencies. There are also two seats reserved for Anglo-Indian community, but with members nominated by the President of India.

Elections for the Lok Sabha and to every State Legislative Assembly and Local Body have to take place every five years, unless called earlier. The President can dissolve Lok Sabha or a State Legislature and call general elections before the five years is up, if the government can no longer command the confidence of the Lok Sabha or the Legislature and if there is no alternative government available to take over. Holding of regular elections can only be stopped by means of a constitutional amendment and in consultation with the Election Commission, and it is recognised that interruptions of regular elections are acceptable only in extraordinary circumstances.

Voting is by secret ballot. Polling stations are usually set up in public institutions, such as schools and community halls. To enable as many electors as possible to vote, the officials of the Election Commission try to ensure that there is a polling station within two kilometers of every voter, and that no polling stations should have to deal with more than 1,500 voters. Each polling station is open for at least eight hours on the day of the election.

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<sup>1</sup> The Indian Community is divided by caste system, which has a system of hierarchy of upper and lower caste. Historically the lower caste people have been oppressed socially, economically and in education. In order to bring equality within the society, the Constitution provides for declaration of the lower castes in a Schedule and provides reservations for them in education, employment and elections into Parliament and Legislatures. A similar Schedule exists for certain tribes who are declared as socially backward.



## Political Parties and Elections

Political parties are an established part of modern mass democracy. The conduct of elections in a democratic set-up depends on the representation by the political parties. Before independence, the people in the country were mobilised under the banner of the Indian National Congress (INC) which emerged as a nationwide political party. The INC also contested the elections held before independence. There was also the Communist Party of India at the National level and many other regional parties at the State level. The Communist Party later was split into the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM). In the late 1970s the Janata Party emerged as an alternative to INC, with many regional parties and a few national leaders coming together. But the Janata Party could not sustain itself as a national party due to many differences among the party leaders. In the '80s the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged. It became a national party later in the '90s.

Immediately after independence, the INC won the elections and formed the Government. In the first Lok Sabha elections there were 23 women elected ([www.parliamentofindia.nic.in](http://www.parliamentofindia.nic.in)). In subsequent elections, the following numbers of women were elected: Second - 24; Third - 37; Fourth - 32; Fifth - 26; Sixth - 18; Seventh - 32; Eighth - 46; Ninth - 28; Tenth - data not available; Eleventh - 40; Twelfth - 44; Thirteenth - 46. All the elected women contested the elections as party nominated candidates. Except for a negligible few, no woman ran in elections as an independent candidate. One such exception was Maneka Gandhi, who is the daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi.

At the State level the participation of women in the Legislative Assemblies is no better than their participation at the Parliament level. The participation of women in the electoral process in India has largely been dependent on the attitude of political parties. Although many candidates contested the elections as independent candidates, the winning candidates for Lok Sabha and the State Legislature usually are members of political parties. Opinion polls suggest that people tend to vote for a party rather than a particular candidate.

## Political Parties in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu was originally called the Madras Presidency consisting of five southern states in India. The INC was the popular political party after independence. It came to power immediately after elections were declared after 1952. The Communist Party of India had a presence also. Later the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was formed and came into power in the 1967 elections. Later came a split in the DMK, and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) was formed. The two parties eventually ruled the State of Tamil Nadu. The INC and the Communist



parties contested elections in alliance with either of the parties. In the 1990s two more political parties emerged, the Pattali Makal Katchi and Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.

## **The Candidate: Balabarathy**

Balabarathy, originally known as Nagalakshmi<sup>2</sup>, is a sitting Member of the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu. She ran for the State Legislature twice. She lost in the first elections but was successful the second time. Her experience in electoral and parliamentary politics can give an understanding of women's participation in Indian national politics.

## **Biography**

Her father is Kathiliappan, who was an active politician and a member of the INC. He was elected President of the Kothapulli Village Panchayat. He was murdered for his alliance with a political party. But the murder was made to appear as death by heart attack and neither the State nor the INC was able to catch the perpetrator. Balabarathy has one brother, who is married and has children. Currently, Balabarathy lives with her brother's family in Dindigul.

Balabarathy studied at K. Pudukottain High School up till 10th standard. Her higher secondary education was at Thambi Thottam Higher Secondary School. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree majoring in Chemistry from Ghandigram College. After her graduation she was employed as an organiser in Balwadi School at Reddiyar Chatram. Here she organised the workers in the school and formed the Reddiyar Chatram Workers Union.

Balabarathy is not married and is not interested in marrying. She believes that marriage will not permit her to carry on her public work. Coming from a traditional family background she never wanted to get herself tied down with family responsibilities.

## **Social Activism**

During 7th and 8th standard <sup>3</sup> in school in 1977 at the time of Indira Gandhi's emergency rule, her teacher introduced her to certain political books which were at that time banned. Her teacher assigned the children in her class

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<sup>2</sup> Balabarathy is her pen name, which she used when writing for Tamil magazines and newspapers. She was also referred to as Bala Bharathy and Nagalakshmi, but more popularly known as Balabarathy. When she contested the elections in the year 1996, there was confusion in introducing her with two names. In order to avoid complications, she decided in the 2000 elections that she would identify herself by her pen name.

<sup>3</sup> The Indian School system has children enter school at the age of 5 in 1st Standard. Schools have classes till 10th Standard, by which a child would be at the age of 15. 7th and 8th Standard shall be in the age groups of 12 and 13.



to find the origin of mountains, rivers, forests, etc. Balabarathy and her classmates started questioning the elders in the village about these assignments. This prompted her to read books on the science. She then understood the prevalence of superstitious beliefs among the people. She started to understand that religion, caste, temples were all developed by human beings for their own protection and to exploit each other. She saw how superstitious beliefs have spread in society and how they ruled the lives of ordinary people.

While employed as an organiser in Balwadi School at Reddiyar Chatram, Balabarathy was inspired by the Sri Lankan Tamil issue which was then a political issue being addressed by various groups. There were demonstrations and rallies happening all over the State. Then she came across the pamphlets circulated by the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), which impelled her to seek out the DYFI office and decided to join it in 1984. Though her father's murder frustrated her and made her cynical towards politics, she looked forward to involvement in the alternative political movement. DYFI's wall writings and speeches in street meetings inspired her to join DYFI. Afterwards she was introduced to the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), which she later became a member of and in 1988 she became the Dindigul District DYFI Coordinator. Both DYFI and AIDWA are wings of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), a political party registered with the Election Commission. (Being a member of DYFI or AIDWA though does not mean that one is a member of the CPM.)

Before joining DYFI, Balabarathy was not keenly interested in women-specific issues. She was more interested in building a movement against the present political situation and for a better society. When she started participating in the activities of AIDWA and sat with its members, she got to know the issues that were being discussed and how the women dealt with them. Among the issues were domestic violence, dowry harassment and other issues at the domestic level which were the major concerns of women. Gradually she got involved in women's issues and realised how women could be caught up in their own world. She became conscious of how the society isolates women by keeping them occupied with issues concerning the day to day running of their households.

Balabarathy's more serious involvement and commitment to women's work happened after the murder of a woman doctor in Dindigul. The victim was Dr. Bhavani who was married to another doctor with whom she worked with. Her husband was alleged to have developed a relationship with another doctor, which Dr. Bhavani came to know about. It was also alleged that he was mentally unbalanced. The investigations after the murder revealed that





the husband had in his possession photographs of Dr. Bhavani with her head, hands and legs severed.

Balabarathy was at the scene of the murder. She saw to it that the police submitted the First Information Report and conducted a postmortem of the body. She was challenged by the fact that the police and state administration still had to be pressured to go through processes required by law. The press covered the entire incident, including the role played by Balabarathy and AIDWA. She led a demonstration to ensure that the police arrested the husband. However, due to the lack of evidence during the trial, the husband was acquitted. Even Dr. Bhavani's family did not cooperate during the trial. They refused to come to the trial and make a deposition in Court. Hence the efforts made by Balabarathy and AIDWA were futile.

There were a few other interventions by Balabarathy which caught the attention of the press and the public, who started viewing her as a women's rights activist. One such case was where a woman and her husband were taken to the police station. Inside the police station the husband was tortured, and the wife was assaulted physically and sexually. She escaped from the police station and was about to commit suicide. Through the intervention of AIDWA, she was taken to the hospital and a case was filed against the police. In another case, a woman died due to dowry harassment. The police reported the case as suicide. Through the efforts of Balabarathy and AIDWA, the police registered the case as dowry harassment and ensured that the investigations were done properly. In all these interventions Balabarathy rushed to the venue of occurrence upon receipt of the information, approached the police, and held demonstrations before the concerned offices, police stations, court, etc. Because the women's movement kept watch over the investigations, the police and other authorities had to do justice to the victims, not out of duty, but out of compulsion and pressure.

There was good media coverage about her activities dealing with issues relating to women. She also started looking at issues pertaining to women from a feminist perspective. By this time she has become very active in addressing women's issues. She was elected as the District Secretary of AIDWA in 1988. In 1991 she became a full member of Communist Party of India (Marxist). Her involvement in other public issues also prompted the party to look at her seriously.

## **Involvement in State Politics**

The CPM nominated Balabarathy as its candidate from Dindigul Constituency to the Tamil Nadu State Assembly in the 1996 elections. The CPM was then in alliance with the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. On the other hand, the DMK and Tamizh Manila Congress



(TMC), a breakaway party from the INC, formed an alliance. AIADMK was in alliance with BJP, a national party with Hindu fundamentalist ideology. That was her first experience as a candidate in an election. She lost by 11,000 votes to the DMK and TMC alliance candidate Mr. I. Periyasamy.

In the 2001 elections the party again nominated her as candidate for the Legislature. The CPM and six other political parties formed an alliance with AIADMK. The DMK formed an alliance with the BJP. She was the only woman candidate in her constituency and her main opponent was the DMK candidate, Mr. Basheer Ahmed. He was a popular candidate as he was the incumbent Chairman of the Dindigul Municipality, from a minority Muslim community and was recognised by the people as a good leader. Nevertheless, Balabarathy defeated him by 2,779 votes, having polled a total of 71,003 votes.

**Table 1: Status: Results Declared for the Dindigul Constituency**

No. of Electors	279,805	Total votes cast	149,977	
No. of Contestants	6	Polling %	53.6	
Candidates			Valid votes in AC	
SI No.	Name	Party	Number	%
1.	Balabarathy (name listed as Nagalakshimi, K. in original table)	CPM	71,003	47.37
2.	Basheer Ahmed, M.	DMK	68,224	45.52
3.	Selvaraj, L.	MDMK	4,662	3.11
5.	Manimaran, R.	IND	2,635	1.76
6.	Muruganandam, V.	IND	1,685	1.12
4.	Balasubramani, S. N.	TYMK	1,668	1.11
				100
Total valid votes			149,877	
Total rejected votes			100	
Total votes counted			149,977	
%age votes counted			100	
Lead margin			2,779	

Balabarathy was nominated both in 1996 and 2001 not because representation had to be granted to a woman, but because of her work and commitment. The Party nominated her in recognition of her active involvement in various issues. She received good press coverage, she was popular among her constituency and she was engaged fulltime in politics. Her gender was incidental. Though her Party supported in principle the reservation of seats for women in Parliament and Legislature, this was not the basis for her nomination.



## Balabarathy's Election Campaign

Election campaign strategies are collectively decided in the CPM. It is not an individual decision. Campaign strategies and the issues to focus on are decided through a democratic process in which Balabarathy participates. Though the central focus of the campaign is decided by the Party centrally, the local issues and their focus are decided by the District level leaders. A candidate cannot deviate from the party's campaign strategies.

In India an election campaign starts when the Election Commission announces the date of elections. It also announces the dates for the filing of nominations, the withdrawal of nomination, scrutiny of the nominations by the Returning Officer, etc. Candidates are given a week to put forward their nominations. These are reviewed by the Returning Officers and if found not to be in order can be rejected after a summary hearing. Validly nominated candidates can withdraw within two days after the review of nominations. The official campaign period lasts at least two weeks from the drawing up of the list of nominated candidates, and officially ends 48 hours before polling closes.

During the election campaign the political parties and contesting candidates are expected to abide by a Model Code of Conduct evolved by the Election Commission on the basis of a consensus among political parties. The Code lays down broad guidelines as to how the political parties and candidates should conduct themselves during the election campaign. It aims to maintain election campaigns along healthy lines, prevent clashes and conflicts between political parties or their supporters, and ensure peace and order until the results are declared. The Code also prescribes guidelines for the ruling party either at the Centre or at the State level to ensure that a level playing field is maintained and that no cause is given for any complaint that the ruling party has used its incumbency to win elections.

Once an election has been called, parties issue manifestos detailing the programmes they wish to implement if elected to government, the strengths of their leaders and the weaknesses and failures of their opponents. Slogans are used to popularise and identify parties and issues. Pamphlets and posters are distributed to the electorate. Rallies and meetings, where the candidates try to persuade, cajole and enthuse supporters while denigrating opponents, are held throughout constituencies. Personal appeals and promises of reform are made, with candidates traveling the length and breadth of the constituency to try to influence as many potential supporters as possible. Party symbols abound, printed on posters and placards.

CPM and its allies also come up with manifestos. The candidates are expected to abide by their manifestos and also not to oppose the issues raised by their



allies. During the campaign Balabarathy is supported not only by her party but also by the party's allies. Hence her campaign strategies are also constrained to the extent of not attacking the ideologies of other parties.

In the 2001 election, the central focus of the campaign strategy of CPM was to attack the DMK and BJP alliance. The DMK was exposed as opportunistic by having an alliance with a religious fundamentalist party. CPM likewise addressed the issues of the consistently deteriorating situation of the working class due to globalisation and privatisation, unemployment and caste violence. The other strategy was to focus on the issues of her constituency. The then-burning issue was water scarcity in Dindigul. Women in Dindigul stored water in as many pots and utensils available. She promised that her party would ensure water supply once every two days. Listening to this, the women asked where and how to store the water and what to do with already stored water. There was a study undertaken by the Tamil Nadu Water Supply and Drainage Board (TWAD Board) under the Kaveri Combined Water Supply Scheme. Balabarathy promised that she would take steps to implement the scheme based on the study and ensure sufficient supply of water to Dindigul.

Balabarathy mentioned that the campaign strategy of CPM differs from other major parties like AIADMK and DMK. She said that in the latter parties, the party leader gives instructions regarding the campaign and decides as to who will participate in carrying out the campaign strategies. According to her, she was not sure whether the candidate participates in deciding campaign strategies in the other parties.

Balabarathy received good support from the people during the campaign. It was very interesting for her to see the way people participated in the rural and urban areas. In the urban areas, women never came near the candidate even if the candidate was a woman. They all stood back in their houses or their balconies and watched the candidates. In the villages women approached the candidates and spoke to them. Some were very cynical saying that the men failed to do anything, so what could a woman do. Some though said that they would see what a woman could do. In some places, women would come to her angrily and ask her what she has done so far because nothing had changed since the last election. In some places women invited her affectionately to their village temple to offer prayers to their deity. They mentioned that all those who came to their village and prayed in the temple got elected. She fondly and laughingly narrated how this belief was told to all candidates. She said that though she did not believe in god and religion, it was fun to participate in the villagers' exercise of their superstitious beliefs. Imagine if all the candidates get to win with the help of the deities.



## Free Campaign Time on State-Owned Electronic Media

All recognised National and State parties are allowed free access to the state-owned All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan television channel on an extensive scale for their election campaigns. The total free air time allocated extends over 122 hours. The allocation is done equitably by combining a base limit and additional time linked to the party's poll performance in recent elections.

## Election Expenditure

CPM provides the necessary financial support for the campaign. Balabarathy did not spend any money from her pocket for the election. For one thing, she and her family do not have any personal income or property to incur such expenditures. According to her, other political parties choose their candidates based on their financial background, as the candidates are expected to bear poll expenditure from their personal finances.

There are tight legal limits on the amount of money a candidate can spend during the election campaign in India. Since December 1997, in most Lok Sabha constituencies the limit was Rs 15,00,000/<sup>4</sup>, although in some States the limit is Rs 6,00,000/-. For State Legislative Assembly elections the highest limit is Rs 6,00,000/-, the lowest Rs 3,00,000/. A recent amendment in October 2003 has increased these limits. For Lok Sabha seats in bigger states is now Rs 25,00,000. In other states and Union Territories, it varies between Rs 10,00,000 to Rs 25,00,000. Similarly, for Assembly seats, in bigger states, it is now Rs 10,00,000, while in other states and Union Territories, it varies between Rs 5,00,000 to Rs 10,00,000. Although supporters of a candidate can spend as much as they like to help out with a campaign, they have to get written permission from the candidate, and whilst parties are allowed to spend as much money on campaigns as they want, recent Supreme Court judgments have ruled that, unless a political party can specifically account for money spent during the campaign, it will consider any activities as being funded by the candidates and counted as their election expenses. The accountability imposed on the candidates and parties has curtailed some of the more extravagant campaigning that was previously a part of Indian elections.

## Restraining and Driving Factors

Though a large number of women have been participating in the local body elections viz., Panchayat, the Parliament and Legislature are still seen as a man's world. The candidates for the elections to the Parliament and

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<sup>4</sup> Currency conversion: Rs 45=US\$ 1



Legislature are decided by the whims and fancies of the political parties. Participation of women in the elections to Parliament and State Legislatures are negligible in number. The largest number of women elected to Parliament in India has been only 46 out of 543, in the 8th and 13th Lok Sabha elections. Though there are political parties headed by women, the participation of women even within these parties is abysmally low. Indira Gandhi headed the Indian National Congress since 1967. Ms. J. Jayalalitha, heads the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu since 1987. Ms. Mayavathi heads Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh. But their leadership has not effected the participation of women in electoral and parliamentary politics. They continue to be male dominated and the participation of women remains insignificant.

Social structure and social norms are often seen as barriers against women's participation in political processes. Equality of opportunity is guaranteed under the Constitution and discrimination on grounds of sex, language, religion, class or creed is prohibited. Yet, women's participation is restrained due to attitudinal, institutional, cultural and social restrictions. Balabharathy decided not to get married as family structure may inhibit her participation in public life. Other than the family and social norms in general, she herself has not felt any restraining forces to participate in the electoral process. Within her party she has been recognised as a political leader. Her individual contribution is recognised by the party. She is not under any pressure economically to spend for her election as her party takes care of her election expenditure. She is allowed to pursue her goals as she identifies herself with the party ideologies and they are not in contradiction.

A study by Forum for Democratic Reforms reveals that "the participation of women in politics has actually declined since the days of freedom movement, both in quantity and quality. Government and politics are more important factors in the economic, social, and power structures in India than in most other countries with stronger civil societies, and so, the effect of women's marginalisation in politics is even more detrimental here. The increasing violence, sexual harassment and victimisation of women at the ground level in many of our political parties have made their participation extremely hazardous now . . . independent India, pervasive gender discrimination has resulted in sidelining even veteran women politicians. It is difficult for women to establish a foothold without patronage from powerful men in the party - that too through close personal relations, as wives, daughters and sisters."

The number of women contestants in parliamentary elections has been very minimal since independence. In the first Lok Sabha elections there were 23 women elected. The highest number of women elected has been 44 out of 544 in the year 1984. Political parties, even those headed by women, are



reluctant to field women candidates. The high cost of campaigning is another deterrent to women candidates. Tables 1 and 2 give a clear picture of this.

**Table 2: Women's Representation in Parliament 1952-1998**

Year	Lok Sabha			Rajya Sabha		
	Seats	Women MPs	% of Women MPs	Seats	Women MPs	% of Women MPs
1952	499	22	4.41	219	16	07.31
1957	500	27	5.40	237	18	07.59
1962	503	34	6.76	238	18	07.56
1967	523	31	5.93	240	20	08.33
1971	521	22	4.22	243	17	07.00
1977	544	19	3.49	244	25	10.25
1980	544	28	5.15	244	24	09.84
1984	544	44	8.09	244	28	11.48
1989	517	27	5.22	245	24	09.80
1991	544	39	7.17	245	38	15.51
1996	543	39	7.18	223	19	08.52
1998	543	43	7.92	245	15	06.12
Average	527	31	5.91	239	22	09.11

Vasuki, a women's rights activist and AIDWA Central Committee Member states that caste polarisation, patriarchal values, criminalisation of politics, corruption, non-sharing of domestic work, character assassination are some of the issues which discourage women from participating in National and State politics. She mused that to be a candidate even in one constituency is already a huge task; that caste considerations are very high and it is very difficult to stay above that; that money is always a problem. Cadre shortage is another problem. She stressed that electoral reforms are needed to overcome this situation.

What drove Balabarathy to participate in elections is her own urge to be in public life and to bring about changes in the society, whereby there will be no inequalities in general. Her own ideology and her commitment to her party are also reasons why she chose to participate in the electoral process. Vasuki points out that there are various reasons why women participate in elections - it may be personal or it may be according to the party's strategy to nominate a woman in a particular constituency. Balabarathy's nomination was due to the fact that CPM got the Dindugal Constituency and was in search of a suitable candidate. Balabarathy was one of the leading activists and so she was nominated. In alliance politics the nomination of a candidate can also be



determined by the seats allotted to a particular party. However, such was not what happened in the case of Balabarathy.

The election of Balabarathy is looked upon positively by women's groups. It is the general opinion that she is different from the usual elected representative. It is recognised that she has made an earnest effort to stand by her promises, that she tried to address the water scarcity in Dindugal and had done her best to implement the schemes designed in this regard. A woman activist from Dindugal observes that even the language of the political leaders changed after the election of Balabarathy. The exchanges of opinions are more dignified than in the past and credit goes to Balabarathy for that.

On one hand, statistics on the success rate of women candidates has always been higher than the male aspirants. On the other hand, the number of women elected to Lok Sabha has not been very impressive. Table 3 illustrates the gender advantage. It shows that the general public has put their confidence more on women candidates.

**Table 3: The Gender Advantage**

Years when contestant won election	No. of seats available	Total no. of contestants	Male			Female		
			Contested	elected	% won	Contested	elected	% won
1952	489	1,874						
1957	494	1,518	1,473	467	31.7	45	27	60.0
1962	494	1,985	1,915	459	24.0	70	35	50.0
1967	520	2,369	2,302	490	21.3	67	30	44.8
1971	520	2,784	2,698	499	18.5	86	21	24.4
1977	542	2,439	2,369	523	22.1	70	19	27.1
1980	542	4,620	4,478	514	11.5	142	28	19.7
1984	542	5,570	5,406	500	9.2	164	42	25.6
1989	529	6,160	5,962	502	8.5	198	27	13.6
1991	521	8,699	8,374	492	5.9	325	39	12.0
1996	543	13,952	13,353	504	3.8	599	39	6.7
1998	543	4,750	4,476	500	11.2	274	43	15.7
<b>Total</b>			<b>52,806</b>	<b>5,450</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>2,040</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>17.16</b>

## Conclusion

Balabarathy is a member of Parliament who has experienced many trials in her career as a politician. She has suffered the loss of her father due to his political activism. Yet, Balabarathy became an active member of CPM and won the second election that she contested. While there are many obstacles





that lead to lesser number of women entering politics, the presence of women members of Parliament is important. Therefore, it is felt that reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislatures along the lines of reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes will enhance the participation of women in electoral and parliamentary politics. The very nature of electoral politics keeps the women out of it because of the obstacles mentioned such as caste, money, power, social norms and various other forms of discrimination against women. Reservation for women will reform the general electoral politics and will pave the way for more participation by women. Today in India the Panchayats, which is the third tier of government at the Village and District level, makes it mandatory for women to participate as a result of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which reserves one third seats for women in the Panchayat Elections. The bill introduced for reservation of seats for women in Parliament and the Legislature is not passed yet due to objections from several parties. But it is certainly the need of the hour. Unless made mandatory, the political parties will not give women due share in the political arena. Balabarathy and her party support the reservation of one third seats for women in Parliament and the Legislature. Balabarathy goes one step further and states that there is a need to have an all-women political party which alone will advance the participation of women in National and State politics.

### **Note:**

Tables are sourced from-

- a) Statistical reports of the Election Commission of India;
- b) “Enhancing Women’s Representation in Legislatures”, a report by Forum for Democratic Reforms; and
- c) Constitution of India.

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