



Electing the First Woman to the Congress of the Federated States of Micronesia

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On 29 November 2021, the voters in the Southern Namoneas election district in the state of Chuuk elected Dr Perpetua S. Konman as the first woman in the Congress of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).¹ It caught the nation by surprise as many citizens believe that women still have a long struggle to become members of that forum (Braun 2012:7; Oliver 2019; Puas 2021: 256–7). Until this election, FSM was the only country in the Pacific to have never elected a woman to its national parliament. Since 2011, eight women have attempted to be elected to Congress, but without success. Women have been perceived as lacking the intricate knowledge of political processes as well as the capacity to make rational decisions for the nation. Such an assumption has been an enduring frustration, particularly for proponents of gender equality within the modern democratic process (Oliver 2019:1–9). This In Brief discusses gender politics in contemporary FSM and the one instance of how a woman candidate was able to win a place in the Congress. To understand women's exclusion from national contemporary politics, an investigation into the nation's past is required.

Influence of colonialism and Christianity

The perpetuation of male dominance in national politics defies the true position of women in FSM. Most FSM island communities are matriarchal where women control economic resources and thereby political influence.² In the pre-colonial era men were the public face for families, taking their instructions from their mothers to ensure the extended families' standing in the community. The man's role was also to protect the family's or clan's reputation should violence erupt in the public sphere. As a cultural taboo, women avoided public spaces if their male relatives were present. However, women were called upon to resolve community frictions because of their economic power and their skill as negotiators. What then led to the displacement of women as political decisionmakers as practised in the past?

In 1986, FSM gained its independence after centuries of four successive colonial powers: Spain,

Germany, Japan and the US. Colonialism brought sexist ideologies (Puas 2021: 64–69) to the islands which altered the order of gender relations. In addition, the introduction of Christianity undermined the balance and social dynamics of gender relations as it favoured an emerging patriarchal order. Consequently, patriarchal ideologies were embedded into the nation's psyche limiting the influence of women to domestic affairs. This ideological foundation curtailed women's political advancement in modern FSM and discouraged many women from participating in the national decision-making process.

The disempowerment of women is thus rooted in FSM's colonial history and the introduction of Christianity. Colonial administrators and church leaders were typically men who exerted control in the political affairs of the islands. They downgraded the role of women in the belief that men are biologically and intellectually superior to women so that the political landscape reflected men's ideological practices. Today, women are fighting to be recognised in the national political system, just as they once were when they exercised political power in their communities and clans. Although the colonial legacy resulted in patriarchal government, modern national politics can be about shared responsibilities between the genders in a democratic form of governance based on equality.

Failed attempts to fast-track women into the Congress

Constitutionally, the Congress is the most powerful branch of government in the FSM and the gateway to national leadership positions such as the presidency. To topple men's firm grip on the Congress, the national government introduced [Congressional Bill 17-147](#). The 2012 Bill sought to guarantee the representation of women in Congress by providing four reserved seats. This Bill was introduced twice and defeated both times, the argument being that women should run for Congress based on merit against male competitors. This view is also supported by many women as indicated by comments made during public hearings.

The current FSM Constitutional Convention is considering an amendment with the same objective as the earlier failed bill.³ If the amendment is confirmed by the convention, it will be listed for referendum in 2022. Many local observers claim that gender relations had never been divisive until outsiders began to make it a problem.⁴ Many FSM citizens consider that the issue has been taken over by educated women who are now demanding that voters support the presence of women in Congress. They fear that such demands will have an adverse impact, especially with both men and women who want to maintain the status quo. To date the use of proposed legal instruments to best position women in Congress has not been effective.

The widow pathway

Dr Konman's election is a case in point as her election arose through an alternative opportunity when she became a widow.⁵ Shortly after her husband's death in September 2021, his constituents asked his wife, Dr Konman, to enter politics to continue his legacy. Dr Konman ran principally with her own political mantra but kept in mind her husband's unfinished business in the Congress. Her husband, Derensio S. Konman, was from Fefan Island and had been a congressman for more than three terms. He was instrumental in expanding social programs, such as youth and climate change projects, in the Southern Namoneas region. Dr Konman's standing in the Chuukese community as a medical doctor as well as her traditional values equipped her to enter politics in her own right. She has served the medical needs of the Chuukese people and practises the Chuukese traditions of *sufen* and *fairo* (be humble and respect Chuukese traditions) considering herself to be at the same level as the people, despite her professional standing in the community.

Dr Konman's support base was already established by her late husband in addition to the support of her own extended family and friends. She also respectfully sought approval of her district's all-male legislators, municipal officers and traditional leaders as anchored by *sufen* and *fairo*. The combination of these strategies cemented her image as a person for the people, leading to her election as the first woman to the FSM Congress.

Reflecting on her win, Dr Konman noted:

It is crucial that the voice of women is heard at the top because they bear the future leaders of tomorrow. They also shape the lives of our future leaders physically, mentally and spiritually ... women are important as well as their voice(s).⁶

Her statement is profound because it centres on the role of women in the nurturing of men, and how women can shape nation-building. It is apparent that Dr Konman is acutely aware of the intersections between politics, education, health and traditions.

For advocates of gender equality in politics, Dr Konman's election cautions against relying solely on legal instruments for progress; other strategies to support the election of women should be considered. Women can utilise traditional practices, or a combination of the modern and clanship system to convince voters that women are no different from men in undertaking the political duties and obligations of a senator in the FSM Congress. Her campaign style is opening up new opportunities for more women to follow suit.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. The Congress, consisting of 14 members, is part of FSM's system of government, which is based on the US model. Members come from FSM's four states: Chuuk, Kosrae, Yap and Pohnpei.
2. FSM society is largely matriarchal except for the island of Yap, where it is patriarchal. See Puas 2021:52–72.
3. The 4th FSM Constitutional Convention was convened in 2020, but is currently on hiatus due to COVID-19.
4. This emerged from the authors' discussions with many men and women in both public and private spheres.
5. For more on the widow pathway, see Baker and Palmieri 2020.
6. Personal communication with Perpetua S. Konman, 3 December 2021.

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