

Women In Charge of State Power In Third World Countries

Ms. Corazon Aquino, President of the Philippines (1986);

Ms. Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan (1989 - August 1990);

Ms. Violeta Chamorro, President of Nicaragua (1990);

Ms. Ertha Pascal-Trouillot, President of Haiti (1990).

All four women came to power through opposition movements against the ruling leaders and the prevailing politics in their countries.

All four women head States which are plagued with ethnic, economic and ideological struggles for power.

All four women, not only struggled to reach their positions, but continue to struggle to keep it and prove their abilities to rule as women.

The journey through power for women like these seems to involve three important phases: First, participating in politics on the national level; Second, being elected to office, neck-to-neck with male competitors; Third, maintaining their status and most importantly refuting the popular beliefs that they are «women». Thus, not only do they have to concentrate on political issues of the moment, but they must constantly deal with the image of women as «weaker» and «emotional» beings as opposed to the «fierce», «diplomatic» and «tough guy» image of their male counterparts.

First: At least two of the four women discussed above-- Ms. Aquino and Ms. Bhutto to be exact-- have come into the world of politics as representatives of the political legacy of a male relative (husband of Aquino and father of Bhutto). They inherited their support from their male relatives. And they were appointed, by the public, to continue the struggles started by these men.

But the essence of the argument here lies in the ideologies these women represent, not the men they inherited it from, i.e. the causes and needs of the masses.

Second: All four women succeeded, not only by promoting certain political ideologies, but through struggles to overthrow the previous unacceptable regimes. Some would argue that they were elected because they represent a convenient test of democracy and equality. That elections were not based on their individual merits as politicians. But that election of a member of a minority group, «women», would be proof enough of democracy in countries that have been under the grips of dictatorship for too long (the Marcos in the Philippines,

General Zia ul-Haq in Pakistan, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and the Duvaliers in Haiti).

Third: Only an extremist and anti-feminist would say that these women are only symbols of power but the real action is carried out by men behind the scenes. It is true that these females-Heads of States have male advisors. After all, we are talking about equality, not subordination nor superordination.

It would be wrong to claim that these women have not proved to the world that women can handle political crises and govern nations.

Ms. Aquino has been President for a number of years. She has survived over a dozen coup d'etat attempts, economic crises, ethnic uprisings in addition to the wheeling and dealing in international politics.

Ms. Bhutto has had to negotiate peace with neighboring India, to answer to the increasing threats of fundamentalists in her country, and to control the ethnic and economic grievances of her people; in addition to being a mother in labor at the time of her election. Ms. Bhutto was forcefully expelled from office on August 6, 1990. She is contesting this decision in the supreme court.

Ms. Chamorro and Ms. Trouillot have been in power for only a few months, and their achievements are yet to be documented.

In short, Ms. Aquino represents the first breakthrough for Third World women in politics during the 80s. Ms. Bhutto is the first female leader in the Muslim World. Ms. Chamorro is among the pioneers in turbulent Latin America, and Ms. Trouillot is a Justice of the Supreme Court and law-maker in a Caribbean island.

How these women succeeded in politics is besides the point now. What is important is that they are a landmark in the participation of women in world politics in general, and the Third World in particular.

Consequently, they proved to the world that women can take charge of political situations, beyond the home. They have shown that women do not have to stand in the shadows of men forever. Ms. Aquino is President Aquino and no longer the wife of opposition leader. Ms. Bhutto is Prime Minister Bhutto and not simply the daughter of opposition leader, and so on and so forth.

The last half of the 80s may have been the pioneering era for women in politics. Hopefully, the 90s will witness the emancipation of women in political participation and political power.

Randa Abul-Husn