

CHAPTER 11

Participation in Democracy – a Challenge

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While democracy as a value is widely supported, participation is often low. Participation is a fundamental principle as democracy can only be realized through involvement of the citizens in political decision making. In this perspective democracy is active, interactive, deliberate and genuinely representative of the wider population (Gould 1988). Being fundamental and at the same time often low, participation is a main challenge to any democracy. One of the oldest claims about the conditions for democratic rule holds that dense intermediary organization and lively participation in them are of critical importance both for the establishment of democracy and for the quality of democratic governance.

Participation is more than consultation where views or opinions are solicited. It is a privilege and a duty of citizens to influence and share control over priority setting, policy making, resource allocation and access to public goods and services. As observed in the Human Development Report of 2002, international efforts to promote change do not work if national actors feel excluded.

Fundamental as participation is, in some instances it may be dysfunctional, or negative. In a situation where a candidate insults his opponent and his followers are 'paid' to applaud that kind of conduct or the candidate delivers small gifts (handouts) to gain support from voters and they comply, these are examples of negative participation. In such cases support of the candidate is not founded on arguments or political conviction, but on politically irrelevant matters. This is an example of Chidam'odzi's observation that the very ideals of freedom of expression and individual liberty 'are capable of shooting democracy in the foot' (1999: 95). Quality of participation requires knowledge, integrity and respect of morals and human dignity among the participants.

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Forms of participation

Sharing

Participation may take various forms. First, there is sharing of information. Through various means of communication citizens and those in power share or access information which may enable or even require them to take action for the common good of the nation. A challenge in this connection is to guard against misinformation by leaders or their agents. With impunity political leaders may mislead the public at political mass rallies and during campaigns by presenting half lies and distorted information. Another challenge is to have people engage in information sharing. A survey on political participation in Malawi reported in Afrobarometer³⁰ 2003 shows that 45 % of the respondents occasionally discuss politics while 36 % never do so. 19 % said they regularly discuss politics with their friends. 32 % said that they follow what is going on in government and public affairs sometimes and 18 % do so most of the time while 50 % hardly follow these issues at all. The majority almost never express their views in newspapers. Attendance at meetings was also reported. 56 % attended self-help associations while at trade union meetings 23 % attended often and only 8 % had never attended. Election rallies come out best as 72 % have attended at least once and as many as 38 % do so frequently.

Consultation

Another form of participation is consultation. This may take place between citizens, public officials, members of the national assembly and civil society. It has the potential of reducing any forms of discord or conflicts among citizens as well as being a powerful means of taking initiatives for the betterment of society and life in general. Afrobarometer 2001 reports after eight years of multiparty democracy in Mozambique that citizens were empowered to participate in a democratic system which enabled them to voice their demands to the state and hold it accountable.

Joint decision making

The third form mentioned here, is joint decision making. This implies the right to negotiate programmes through unions, professional associations such as the Malawi Law Society and religious organizations. It may also take the form of inviting different parties with special competence or interest in a matter in order to reach constructive and acceptable decisions. This strategy is often a robust basis for the implementation of the policies agreed upon.

³⁰ Afrobarometer is a compilation of research reports on democracy in selected African countries.

Initiation and control by stakeholders is yet another form of participation. Here citizens exercise some control in monitoring and evaluating to make sure that the political programmes meet their interests and demands. A good example is the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) where the people choose which project to be realized in their community with funding from MASAF. Another example may be taken from surveys where citizens express their attitudes, like trust for different parts of the government. Simutanyi reports that Zambians display a very low attachment to political parties (2002). They had little general trust in local government (20 % trusting), parliament (23 %), the president (37 %) and the police (38 %). About half the population (51 %) said that in their view most officials in government were corrupt. Management of the economy was rated at 33 % satisfaction while creation of jobs was given 26 %. The government performance of the then president (Chiluba) however, was rated relatively good at 64 %. Giving responses in this kind of surveys is a way of participating in their democracy.

*Initiation
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holders*

The next to be mentioned is actions. The regular tool in politics is to use words, written or spoken. But there is also certain precedence in some situations to use some sort of action, be it demonstration, picketing line or sit ins. Rather usual as such actions may be on television and other media, statistically they do not happen very often. This notion is supported by a survey reported in Afrobarometer 2003 which shows that 67 % of the respondents said they would never attend a demonstration and 73 % would never participate in a boycott of rates, services or taxes. 84 % said they would never participate in sit ins or disruptions of government meetings or offices. 90 % said they would never use force or violent means such as damaging public property. Scarce as they may be, the mere fact that such actions may be an option for participation, they probably play an important part in the total relationship between political leaders and the man in the street.

Taking action

Finally comes voting. Free and fair elections at regular intervals are taken to be the most significant mark of democracy and voter turn out is a very important indicator of the state of democracy in a society. It is therefore interesting to note that voter turn out in Malawi Presidential Elections declined to 59% in 2004 from 80% in 1994 and 93% in 1999. In the parliamentary elections in 2004 voter turn out was lower in the southern region at 56% compared to 64 % in the north and 61 % in the centre. There are reasons to believe that

*Voting in free
and fair
elections*

this decline is a reflection of disenchantment with the political process rooted in the perception of Malawian politicians as being self-interested. Citizens see the vote as of little value except putting people into positions where they can advance their own personal interests. The fact that nearly half of the eligible voters opted to stay away from the 2004 elections suggests that the newly elected members of parliament and the president has a limited public mandate in Malawi. Observers noted that the president was elected by only 36 percent of valid votes (Malawi Government Press 2004).

The Norwegian situation

An ideal situation?

Norway has a formal democratic tradition dating back to the beginning of the 1800s. Stein Ringen (2007: 257) regards it among the most robust of today's democracies. The constitution of 1814 is still fundamental to the nation's identity. The country may be characterized as one of great equity with no historical aristocracy and a weak bourgeoisie, with a general high level of education and as a champion of gender balance. The country may proud herself of good governance which is supported by broad-based popular movements and mass political parties. This situation seems to be close to ideal. Norway scores among the best on most indicators on democracy reported by the UN (UNDP 2002). Nevertheless, there are some trends that should be noted.

Voting participation on a decline

Voter participation is steadily declining. Ringen (2007: 259) reports a downward trend in voter turn out from 85% in 1965 to 75% in 2001 in national assembly elections (Stortinget). In the municipal elections participation is down from 81% in 1963 to 55% in 2003. Interestingly enough, women are reported to have caught up with men in voter participation. The power of the people in the chain of government from election to position and to decision making has been weakened. People have limited confidence in the system of representation. In a study on power and democracy in Norway (Østerud et al 2003), three out of four interviewees were in agreement with the view that political parties were not interested in views of the people. Four out of five agreed wholly or partly that elected representatives to Stortinget give little consideration to the views of the common people. These figures indicate that the system of representation is facing a crisis.

The traditional equity is under pressure. The study mentioned above, reports that popular reform movements and parties mobiliz-

ing mass participation are showing signs of a downward trend. Institutions such as the state church are faltering in their efforts to cope with an increasingly multi religious society and in spite of a national curriculum schools are becoming more diversified. The Norwegian state is becoming a petroleum state with extensive ownership interests in the commercial sector and substantial allocation of reserves. Utilisation of the abundant resources such as fisheries and hydropower is being partly privatized and concentrated on fewer hands. Economic inequality is on the rise particularly in terms of investment income and private industry.

Political parties and organizations do not to the same extent as before serve as the channel for broad-based, long term mobilization. The political parties undergo a transformation from mass parties into parties based on networks. It is now possible to obtain political power independent of victory at the polls. Norwegian minority parliamentarianism implies that there is no immediate connection between electoral result and a position in the government. This probably undermines people's trust in the formal channels of government.

It has been observed elsewhere that democracy builds on power through popularly elected bodies but also on rights and guarantees of rights for individuals and groups. This implies that there are various forms of participation available outside of voting, parties and political popular movements. Examples are the ability to exert influence as user, consumer and active member of pressure groups. These and others represent a kind of supplementary democracy and may take different forms like rights based democracy, direct action democracy, participatory democracy, consumer democracy, lobbyist democracy and barometer based democracy. Ringen (2007: 259) claims that middle class citizens dominate these arenas while the working class is not so much involved here. Such arenas supplement and challenge representative democracy as decision making system but they cannot replace it.

Challenges for participation

Effective participation requires guarantees on human rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, the right to elect representatives and freedom of access to information held by state authorities. Participation in the democratic activ-

Traditional equity under pressure

Election results do not solely determine political power

Supplementary types of participation challenge representative democracy

Participation a right and an obligation

ities of the country or state is not only a right, it is also a duty which each citizen should be proud to assume and exercise responsibly. The voting process entails participation in democracy. Therefore voter apathy is one of the challenges as shown by the decline in voter participation during elections. It appears that people too seldom participate in activities that enhance democracy and that democracy itself allows them to do so.

*Legacy of
history:
subject rather
than citizen*

Bauer (2004), referring to Afrobarometer of 2002, claims that legacy of the one party rule makes many Malawians accept being subjects rather than citizens. They welcome the new freedom of expression but at the same time still feel hesitant to express their political opinions. They also continue to shy away from criticizing government. They remain accustomed to being passive receptors of government policies. They find it easier to go to political rallies than to engage themselves in open debate and discussion. The absence of a critical mindset is manifested even in parliament where there is little meaningful debate on major issues affecting the politics and economics of the country.

*Poverty a
challenge to
participation*

Poverty is a challenge to participation in Malawi where politicians generally take advantage of needy and ill-informed populations, easily swaying public opinion in favour of their causes without being challenged. Coupled with poor information flow, poverty makes the poorly educated masses vulnerable to handouts by politicians. Furthermore, poverty in general creates a dependency syndrome, which makes it hard for poor people to believe that they can participate in running the state. Most poor people are preoccupied with keeping body and soul together. Participation in politics is secondary in survival strategies. Thus a combination of social and economic factors work against informed political participation by the poor. An electorate that easily votes on the basis of election handouts or not so important political issues like region, religion and tribe is rather easily manipulated by cunning politicians. This may lead to a situation where misinformed voters actually make up the majority and vote into office persons that will not be good representatives of the poor.

*Focus on the
national level*

It is evident that attention in the media as well as in research has a tendency to focus on the national level. Important as this obviously is, except for elections, participation on a lower geographical level may be more easily realized. This is so mainly because of the difference in geographical and psychological distance between common

man and government on local and national level. A main challenge is therefore for local and district institutions to take a special responsibility for moulding a participatory culture in politics. The nearness to the situation makes it easier for local people to identify projects and activities which will improve their area. Their motivation for participating will rise accordingly. At local level people may gain experience in taking initiatives, accounting for funds, using resources and organizing projects or activities in general while improving the welfare of their area. Through local experience people may gain the competence and self confidence to engage in political activities on regional and national level.

Illiteracy is also one of the challenges to participation. Where the majority of the citizens cannot read and understand the constitution or party manifestos, frequently they blindly follow political leaders and party slogans. They cannot follow what goes on in government. Since they cannot read they may not follow written instruction before casting their vote. This leads to spoiled or rejected ballot papers denying their candidates some vital votes. Afrobarometer 2003 reports that in the six countries surveyed³¹, 50% hardly follow political issues. Such citizens cannot engage in meaningful political debates necessary for nurturing democracy.

Illiteracy a challenge to participation

Concluding remarks

As Gould (1988) states, democracy is active, interactive deliberate and genuinely representative of the wider population and can be done any time, any place. There is need to improve and encourage participation for democracy to flourish. The falls in voter turnout at elections is a consequence of many factors. In most cases there is a lack of ownership of the system. Poverty encourages corruption of the voter through handouts and easy promises. Poverty of the mind (illiteracy) is worse. Civic education, including democracy education and economic empowerment may improve this situation.

Participation must be encouraged

³¹ The six countries were Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South-Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Questions

1. Bratton et al (2000) defines participation in democracy as the extent to which ordinary folks (citizens) join in development efforts, comply with the laws of the land, vote in elections, contact elected representatives, engage in protests and consider migration. Based on this definition Bratton claims that most of the countries in the South are not yet ready for full participation in democracy.
Discuss whether or not Malawi is ready for full participation in democracy.
2. The many challenges to democracy include lack of guarantees on human rights, misinformation and promising citizens the sky by politicians. Lack of interest and knowledge is quite an outstanding challenge. Many are ignorant of the political playing field. There is also low attachment to political parties coupled with non-compliance to political ideals. In Malawi legacy of the one party dictatorship lingers while poverty and election handouts in form of cash or materials aggravate the problem. Assess these challenges in light of your own experiences.
3. Reflect on the political situation in your country.
How do you rate your own participation in strengthening her democracy?

Activity: Classroom debate

Conduct a debate in the classroom on the following topic:
'Negative participation discourages democracy and encourages corruption.'

Instruction

When you conduct a debate of this kind in the classroom, after presenting the topic, the students are allowed to choose sides, for or against the statement. The teacher may take the function of chair but this assignment may also be given to one of the students. Let the two sides elect a leading proposer and opposer. The proposer represents the affirmative view on the issue, while the opposer contradicts it. After a short period of preparation (a few minutes), the leaders present their view in an

opening statement, outlining the main arguments supporting their view. After the opening presentations, the floor is opened for others to participate. The debate may last until the arguments are exhausted or until the planned time expires. Towards the end the two leaders sum up the discussion. Finally a secret vote may be conducted, where the participants vote for the view they now support. Note: It will not always seem viable to vote on the issue. Leaving the topic with an open end may in some cases be just as good, signalling that the debate may continue outside the classroom.

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