

Women's Caucus Calls For People-Driven Constitution

by Judith Achieng'

NAIROBI—The Kenyan Women's Political Caucus has added its voice to calls for a people-driven constitution that will specifically address women's human rights.

The Caucus of women politicians in this East African nation insists that there can be no substitute for a constitutional review process that consults the people, and that women must benefit from the new constitution.

President Daniel Arap Moi has frequently argued that the country's Parliament should draft the new constitution, because most Kenyans know little about the law. "If you ask 'Wanjiku' (a common female name in the local Kikuyu language) what she wants to be changed in the constitution, she will tell you that she has elected people in Parliament to deal with such questions," the Kenyan leader argues.

Moi's ruling Kenyan African National Union (KANU) dominates the Parliament, and opposition groups say that if only Parliament is involved in the rewriting of the constitution, the majority of Kenyans will be locked out from the process.

The Kenyan leader also claims that the 4.5 billion shillings meant to be allocated to civic education and paying an independent constitution commission would be "wasted on 25 people running around doing nothing, when more than 40 percent of Kenyans, the majority of them women, live in absolute poverty." One U.S. dollar is equivalent to 74 Kenyan shillings.

But the Women's Political Caucus, a body formed in 1997, says the debate on the constitution comes at a time when the voice of the 'Wanjikus' needs to be heard more than ever.

Taking the process back to Parliament would further marginalise her, the Caucus adds.

"I am sure Wanjiku does not know what the constitution is all about, but she does know when she is hungry. She wants to participate in decision making and does not want to be beaten by her spouse," says Wanjiku Kabira, a member of the Caucus.

"She knows that she does not like feeling pain and this is what she wants to see in the constitution," Kabira adds.

The Caucus is the latest organisation to add its voice to the growing number of groups opposed to Moi's decision to refer constitutional reform to Parliament, instead of an earlier agreed independent commission.

Since June 1999, there has been a wave of protests by the opposition, religious groups, university students and even the Children's Caucus. All of the groups have vowed to do anything within their powers to ensure that the review process is driven by the people as a right, and not in Parliament.

"Evidently the ruling party is bent on a review process that locks out Kenyans from participating for selfish reasons of personal aggrandisement, under the guise that Kenyans are not capable or competent enough," says Phoebe Asiyo who heads the Women's Political Caucus.

"We interpret people-driven and people-centred to mean that the process of writing a new constitution issues directly from each and every Kenyan citizen," she adds.

Both KANU and the opposition had agreed earlier last year on the appointment of an independent commission to handle the constitutional reform process.

The commission, which was to comprise all stakeholders, was to go out to seek the views and suggestions of the electorate on what parts of the constitution they wanted changed.

KANU's Secretary General Joseph Kamotho last week added fuel to the fire over the constitutional review process when he said that part of the reason why the ruling party wanted the constitutional reform process to go back to Parliament was to remove some "amorphous" groups, like religious and women's groups.

Kamotho's remarks angered the women's movement. Only three percent of the 222 legislators in the Kenyan Parliament are women. "I don't think that we should fool ourselves. We know that parliamentary and judiciary institutions have been used to fight women," says Kabira.

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