

Democracy and Political Participation of Minorities

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I would like to thank Gay McDougall and the organizers for the invitation to this important seminar on the political participation of minorities. I invoke my ancestors for opening the road and accompanying us in the challenge of transforming democracy.

1. Democracy and Political Participation of Minorities

From a wide perspective, the political participation of ethnic and cultural minority groups is a condition of democracy. If we consider democracy as a system of government through which people choose their representatives periodically and these in turn resolve with the resources of the State the needs of the citizenry, then the bodies of political representation should guarantee that majorities and minorities are represented in political decision-making and executive bodies, even at the most highest level.

As previously mentioned, the first requirement of democracy is representation, which implies the right and guarantee for members of minority groups to be able to present their names in popular voting lists with the real possibility of being elected, so that in spaces of political power the visions, proposals, and needs of these social groups are contemplated.

Despite the fact that ethnic diversity has been recognized as a value for society, the real obstacles that ethnic and cultural minorities face, as well as sectors traditionally excluded from power structures, result in democratic systems that do not reach the basic requirement of representation.

What has been called a democratic system hardly meets the requirement of fair and periodic elections, which most of the times leave real minorities outside the option of being part of the institutions through which decisions are made and the resources of society are distributed. For women who at some instance were determined to be minorities, their political participation continues to be extremely limited, but even more limited for women who are part of ethnic and cultural minority groups in society.

My political proposal is based on the recognition that sexism and racism serve as structural bases of subordination and domination of some human beings over others. Intercultural democracy with parity has as an objective “the construction of a political formula that encompasses all the demands of subordinated sectors, among these racial, ethnic, and gender groups, and is focused on the reconsideration that of the actual role of the State and advocates a general change of mentality for all sectors of national society with respect to the idea of democracy and a homogenized nation.

Intercultural democracy with parity calls into question the structure of the rules of the political game that are now valid, and claims that regional democracy should not conform with changing the photographs of those represented, but should give new meaning to the exercise of power, that should have as its only

sense the common good and the rights without restrictions of all people living in society. The quotas for female political participation have not been able to modify structurally political representation because they open fundamental spaces to women who are part of racial majorities or dominant ethnic groups, thus expressly excluding women who are part of racial minorities not dominant in racist societies.

Many of the actual democratic systems are going through serious crises, not only in the representation of diverse sectors of society but also on their credibility. There is a tendency that the formal political positions of power are converted into a tool for personal benefit or in limited instances for labor unions, leaving outside the common good that is an essence of democracy. Corruption, inefficiency, the bad distribution of rents, improvisation, short-sightedness, are characteristics of those so called democratic systems.

The political participation of racial and ethnic minorities is a right, an opportunity to improve democratic participation and a pretext to improve the quality of deteriorated democracies in countries where millions do not have a guarantee of their human rights.

Given my political experience, it is necessary to promote judicial changes to guarantee the human right to political participation of racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities, as well as disempowered majorities, and that such changes are translated into concrete affirmative actions. In this manner, it will be possible to have a direct influence in the changes occurring inside party politics, which most often are the first obstacle to access the nominations to popularly elected positions.

As citizens belonging to political minorities, we should be guaranteed the right to aspire and reach any popularly elected position, from the Presidency to local positions. For this reason, I took the first step to reach the Presidency of my country, Costa Rica, as a woman of African descent who has a proposal for all of society and who recognizes social inequalities given my own experience in life.

It is imperative to internationalize the advances and obstacles of our political participation, as well as strengthen our collective capacities. In this sense, I would like to highlight the efforts of the Black Parliament of the Americas as a space that brings together political representatives of the region who are from African descent.

Finally, I would like to make some recommendations to strengthen the political participation of minorities and these should be institutionally advanced:

1. Affirmative actions and quotas, not only based on gender but also ethnic and racial.
2. Public financing of politics/policy especially of political minorities.
3. Promote as an indicator of the quality democracy the degree of political participation of minorities in the bodies of popular representation.

4. Create an international observatory on the political participation of minorities.
5. Create a United Nations report about the reality of fulfilling the right of political participation of minorities.