

## Ethnic Tensions Compound the Challenge for Women in Kenya

by Wangari Maathai



ethnic communities in Kenya. Ethnic tensions in Kenya were rising and were deliberately stimulated to influence the outcome of the elections.

Unfortunately, the women's agenda was significantly outweighed by the ethnic factor which has dominated Kenyan politics since late 1991. This ethnic factor became a decisive parameter in the elections. Ethnic polarization, coupled with killings and displacements of innocent citizens at the instigation of known politicians, deepens fear and suspicion among communities. The more threatened people feel, the more they will project it in their actions and reactions and at no time was this better demonstrated than in this electoral campaign.

In Kenya because of the immense political and economic power invested in the Head of State, who literally owns the country and the resources therein, the office of the President is sought both as a source of power and the enormous privileges which go with the office. At the same time, communities (tribes) have come to look at the office as a commodity which their sons (not so much their daughters) should get hold of so that they too can, to use a phrase often used by politicians to their people, "also eat," as have others before them. Therefore, it was very easy for the women's agenda to become a secondary

agenda. Access to food and daily necessities came first, for men and for women.

My grandparents resisted the colonial empires at the turn of this century. At one meeting, the colonial administrators addressed our people in English while our people spoke their mother tongue. Unable to understand what they were being told to do, the elders left their seats and declared, "We have to go home. Those who will speak to you in your English language, have yet to be born." I take pride in that I am one of those they went home to encourage. I now communicate in English as well as my native tongue.

Bella was aware of our efforts with civic education, peace trees and a re-settlement program for the internally displaced. Bella had also been following our work of planting trees to provide poor women with some income and a healthier environment for more than a decade.

Today in most Kenyan communities, girls have the same chance of going to school as do boys. That is because half a century ago, our own mothers pioneered against many odds. Some were themselves illiterate when they made the decision to send their children to school. The battles are constantly being won but the war is still on!

I think that the most important contribution of women's candidacies, including for parliament, is the participation. The path has been walked and others will find it easier to follow. Those first steps must be made by those who pioneer and my experience is that most pioneers do not enjoy the fruits of their labor.

The road is long and the battles many. Bella is now gone to rest. She fought her own battles long, often and persistently. That, to me, is what matters. Along the tortuous road to freedom and justice for all, many hopes are shattered.

Yet, as she herself demonstrated so well, we must never lose hope. I never do. For me it is a journey and I continue to pursue it wherever fate leads me. As dumbfounded as I was on that morning when the media informed me that I had withdrawn my candidacy in favor of another candidate, I learned to rise from the ashes of disappointment and look to the road yet ahead.

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I arrived on a beautiful sunny day in New York to attend the memorial tribute for my friend and sister, Bella Abzug. As I mourn Bella and try to comfort myself and others who knew and loved her, I reflect on some of the steps that I have taken and the reasons she and I met and worked together. Bella was a pioneer. She dared walk into the unknown and take risks. Sometimes she won and sometimes she lost. But in every situation she picked the silver lining in the cloud and made the best of it. To me, that was encouraging, inspirational and admirable. I would have loved to walk farther with Bella, especially now after my recent venture into a political arena. Her health and distance did not allow me to share with her the details and the intricacies of what happened in my campaign for the Presidency of Kenya.

In 1992 I was required to resign my position in the University of Nairobi before I could present myself for a by-election. During those days, candidates were given permission to run with the only political party allowed in the country. The party refused to grant permission. I took the party to court and tried to get my constitutional rights respected. They were denied. And so there I was: alone, without a job, single and without support and security, without a house and with three kids looking up to me! All I could think of was how towering I had to be to provide adequate security to them even while I was so insecure and so vulnerable. I knew that no matter what happened I had to be the tower of hope not only to myself but to others who equally faced by impossible barriers learn to look for the silver lining in the cloud. Sometimes, as a woman and as the victim of injustices you may be the only one who can see that sign of hope.

Bella's great desire to see women at the center of decision-making and power-sharing was championed by the presence of the many women candidates at all levels in Kenya in the 1998 round of elections. Bella waited with much anxiety for the outcome. I understand that like many others elsewhere, she was very disappointed by the apparent poor performance, including that of Charity Kaluki Ngilu, the woman candidate who seemed to be doing very well in the race. She placed fifth, receiving about 360,000 votes, compared with the 2,400,000 votes for incumbent President Moi. Because of a false, widely distributed report that I had withdrawn from the presidential race, I received a negligible number of votes.

But Bella also knew that there has been a strong polarization of