

Profile

“Headscarf Among the Turbans” - Amina Salihu profiles Habiba Sabo Gabarin [1]

This piece is drawn from Amina Salihu's profile of the Honourable Habiba Sabo Gabarin in Women, Marginalisation and Politics in Nigeria, ed. Jibrin Ibrahim and Amina Salihu (Global Rights, the Centre for Democracy and Development and the Open Society Initiative for West Africa, 2004). This book provides 15 profiles of women politicians who stood in the 2003 elections, representing the political spectrum and region of Nigeria. It documents the systematic exclusion of women through a series of corrupt and abusive practices, many of which are unacceptable in the modern democracy that Nigeria is striving to become. Women have responded to this difficult political environment by developing various strategies, many of which have not been previously recorded. Some, like barrister Nkoyo Toyo (denied her victory at the polls by a combination of thuggery and declaration), have taken their cases to the courts. Others display a degree of pragmatism, if not outright complicity that warrants attention. Salihu's revealing profile of Habiba Sabo Gabarin examines the various strategies deployed by a woman determined to pursue a political career in the northern state of Bauchi, in the context of shari'a law and entrenched patronage networks.

Habiba Sabo Gabarin is without doubt a trailblazer who holds a unique position in the modern polity of Nigeria. Not only is she the sole woman among the 31 members of the Bauchi State House of Assembly in Northern Nigeria, she holds this position as a Muslim woman in a state that practices shari'a law. By 2003, 19 out of Nigeria's 36 states (all in Northern Nigeria) had instituted the shari'a as state law. As practiced in this region, this restricts the freedom of association and movement of women. In these circumstances, Habiba's choice to enter politics was unusual in the extreme, and must have required considerable courage.

Habiba was first elected to the State House in 1997, and re-elected for a second term in the 2003 elections. She is currently Chair of the Bauchi State House Committee on Women and Youth Affairs.

Habiba's struggles to achieve this position are an indication of her tenacity and political acumen. Her story makes it clear that women politicians have to negotiate complex territory, both on the political and domestic fronts, in order to succeed. There is no doubt that as a female politician, she has both had to play the game by male rules (something she has done with aplomb), while at the same time conforming to the double standards held for women in masculine territory.

Habiba's background does not seem exceptional at first glance. She was born in 1952 into a Muslim Hausa family in Gabarin, which falls under the Darazo local government of Bauchi State. Her father was not rich, but by community standards he was a man of means. Habiba attended boarding school, which she preferred to home life because at a girls' school she did not experience maltreatment. At the age of 17, she was removed from school to be married, as her father thought she was too old to educate further. She gave birth to the first of her six biological children (she has adopted others) at the age of 18.

Thus far, Habiba's life resembled that of her middle-class female compatriots. However, she was determined that motherhood need not mean the end of her education, and attended teachers' training college, as well as undertaking administrative courses in between raising her family. Over several decades, she headed a number of primary schools in Bauchi. From 1986 until 1992, she worked for the university; it was upon retiring from this post that she joined active politics.

Habiba's personal history impressed on her the need for human rights for women:

I knew about women's oppression from an early age because oppression came to me in my house. When my father died, I was not given any piece of land because they said a woman does not farm ... I learnt from there that men do not like women. I understand that marriage too can be just like slavery.

It is in the arena of marriage and family that one sees the extent to which compromise and negotiation became the hallmarks of Habiba's journey into politics. While combining work in the civil service with marriage and children could be tolerated in terms of local culture, participation in elective politics was a very different matter. The general sense was that a woman had no business to place herself among men, who were divinely charged with the responsibility of making important decisions. Her role was to remain in the home, and to be supportive of such men. Therefore much negotiating within the family was required before Habiba could enter the political arena. She candidly states that she was fortunate to have her husband's permission to participate in politics. In her own words: "Entirely what I got from my husband to help me in my political career was his consent – just to allow me go into politics."

Nevertheless, there was a price to pay. Her going into political and public life was construed as an abdication of the traditional role, and in this context, her husband began to take other wives. Moreover, because of her status within the family, and her financial clout, she was perceived as the one who should raise the children of these other unions. A deal was thus hammered out: she could forge ahead with her political career, as long as she tacitly agreed to her husband's polygamy and used her financial resources to help bring up the children of the other wives.

So throughout Habiba's career, her independent source of income has been vital to survival, even at the level of the family unit. It enabled her to build a home for herself, where she lives with her children, and which doubles up as a political office. The impact of these financial resources on her political career cannot also be underestimated, as will be discussed further below.

It is also at the domestic level that the question of the double standard for male and female behaviour first appears: while her husband is free to take other wives, Habiba's conduct has to be beyond reproach: "We have an understanding; he knows I am not a loose woman, so he has confidence in me." This translates directly into her public identity: as she bluntly states: "If I was known to be a woman with no morals, nobody [would] vote for me." She insists that it is her moral conduct that guarantees her the respect of her colleagues and constituency.

Long before she formally joined partisan politics in 1992, Habiba was involved in campaigning and in the affairs of Bauchi State. She describes the period as one in which she was an "armchair politician": "Even as a civil servant, they used to call me to co-ordinate their campaigns for them. I was campaign co-ordinator for the late Shettima Mustapha when he vied for President under NRC."

By the time she was ready to enter politics as a formal contender, she had a great deal of experience in organising campaigns. She went into politics because it seemed the natural thing to do. She believed that women were considered more honest than men; she thought it would be relatively easy to convince the party and the electorate to give her their votes. It was not that simple, as her political trajectory shows.

Although Habiba first tried to stand for the Bauchi State House of Assembly in 1993, under the umbrella of the National Republican Convention (NRC), she regards her participation in the primaries and subsequent elections for the House of Representatives in 1998 as her formal entry into politics. In 1997, she had joined the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP),

which would later adopt General Sani Abacha as their sole Presidential candidate. From this platform, she stood in the April 1998 House of Representatives election, and won the Darazo constituency seat. But she had hardly begun her work when General Abacha suddenly died. The succeeding General Abdulsalami Abubakar regime scrapped all five parties, while announcing a new transition initiative with a handover date of May 1999.

So it was back to the drawing board for Habiba. She returned to work as a businesswoman to begin saving towards another foray into politics. Experience had taught her to play the waiting game, and to be strategic. She joined the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 1998, and in 1999 she stood in the elections for the Bauchi State House of Assembly. She won a seat, becoming the first and only woman in a state legislature of 31 members. In May 2003, she sought re-election to the House of Assembly, having already won the primaries for her constituency, Darazo. She recalls her experience of the 2003 primaries:

This time it was tougher than in 1999, because there were more parties and more aspirants. I contested with two other men in PDP; one of them withdrew, but I went ahead [against] the other man and I won.

Among the reasons why she won in 1999, and won re-election in 2003, was because she brought those lessons she had learnt from her membership of the NRC and the UNCP to bear on her membership and election bid in the PDP:

In NRC, I learnt some lessons. I wanted to go to the House of Assembly, but I was intimidated, I was not even allowed to pick up a nomination form. I was going to contest against Ali Shehu, but I was not even given a chance to contest at the primaries. Ali Shehu had no money, but because he was from Darazo Ward, he was favoured. But then I waited until it was my time. I had to come back when the people were ready for me. When you want to buy something and you have no money, just bide your time, don't force yourself to buy on credit – or you will be the loser.

Recounting her experiences within three different parties, Habiba believes that certain key elements remain the same. These include party loyalty, having loyal supporters within the party and your constituency, and adequate resources to finance a campaign. With regard to the latter, she notes the increasingly important role that money plays in politics. Even party loyalty is increasingly expressed in terms of monetary support; according to Habiba: "I pay my party dues. Every quarter I paid N10 000, and after I became a member of the House of Assembly, I began paying N20 000 every quarter."

Habiba's independent financial resources have in many respects enabled her to play "the man's game". For her, personal financial investment is clearly a sign of commitment and shows that she has the courage to take risks:

During my contest under NRC, I put the whole of my gratuity after I retired from university work into politics. People were laughing at me, saying this is a foolish thing to do. But for me ... no going back.

Influence is the other critical instrument of power in modern Nigerian politics, and here Habiba has been well-placed. Since 1983, she has held appointive positions in Bauchi state. She has served on the Board of Bauchi State Institute for Higher Education, and has also been a member of the taskforce on environmental sanitation, and the implementation committee of the Bauchi State adult and non-formal education project. There is speculation that she made substantial gains – both in terms of financial and political capital – through her many appointments in Bauchi State, and that these have enabled her to finance both the construction of her house and her political campaigns. So while she is not a very rich woman by Bauchi standards, Habiba is nevertheless considered by some to be a contractor of means who has friends in high places. [2]

Habiba herself takes support where she finds it:

I was pleasantly surprised when for my 2003 campaigns, the Emir of Bauchi sent me 30 wrappers and some money as his own contribution to my fund-raising efforts, and the Galadima sent me 20 wrappers and some money. These are men, and I am a woman, but they support me.

Habiba's perceived closeness to the Bauchi State government also signifies her power vis-à-vis the other members of the house. She ran a joint campaign with Governor Ahmadu Muazu, the incumbent governor, when he sought re-election. She was a member of his campaign train, and there can be little doubt that the governor in turn supported her re-election. It is claimed that he said he would rather lose five male members of the house than Habiba. [3] This doubtlessly contributes to the perception that she is able to be outspoken because she has the backing of the state executive.

Nevertheless, while pragmatic in her approach to political power, Habiba has not coasted along on a tide of cronyism. She has worked extremely hard and made use of every opportunity. On the campaign trail in particular, she has been tireless.

For example, the question of voter education came to the fore during campaigning for the recent elections. This was due to the registration of new parties. Habiba noted that although in theory, this expanded the political arena, in reality, it proved to be more of a challenge than a blessing. This was especially so given the short space of time between the registration of the new parties and the election campaign. The lack of adequate voter education, especially in the rural areas, where the constituencies are largely non-literate, further complicated matters. This meant that candidates had to work extra hard to educate voters on how to identify the party logo of their choice:

When we had three parties, there were fewer problems, campaigning was easier, and people understood the symbols of the parties, but now – a lot of confusion. I had to ... collect the sample ballot paper ... it took me about nine days going round to show the people, this is where I belong. I tell them – vote [for] the umbrella – it is down, down on the ballot paper. In the villages, people only know the symbols.

But there is more to campaigning than voter education, and Habiba shows a shrewd and astute grasp of the elements required for success. She recommends cultural knowledge, pointing out the need to know the gatekeepers and show respect for and an understanding of the local culture. Likewise, she views religious leaders as gatekeepers who need to be cultivated.

She also believes that a person needs to have a constituency or “roots”, a place where one's pedigree is known. Women politicians contesting for local seats are often forced to hover between their own home town or village of origin, and that of their husband's residence.

Habiba has made a clear choice:

I am from Darazo, but my husband is from Bauchi. I came back to Darazo to contest because in Bauchi, nobody knows me. My husband cannot help me even though he is from Bauchi. But in Darazo, everybody knows me, they knew my father, I can influence the elders.

As well as negotiating these hurdles, Habiba fights gender discrimination on a continuous basis while campaigning. As she says:

My experience in life has taught me to be independent. Now I go on my campaigns and come in when I am finished and not before. Before people used to say to me, don't you know you are a woman? What are you doing in the bush [campaign trail] after 4pm? Now I am a lioness, nobody can hurt or harm me. In some communities, they told me: go home, we will not vote for you ... why don't you go and take care of your children? It is ignorance talking, not them.

Habiba's hard work on the campaign trail has paid off, – she has won her seat twice. As an elected politician, she remains committed to and engaged with members of her constituency. It has already been noted that moral rectitude is essential to her political standing. So is her

religious observance. Being a good Muslim, she observes the cardinal principles of Islam. She prays five times daily and has been on hajj six times.

This resonates with her support of and identification with her constituents. For example, every Ramadan [4], Habiba goes to her home village of Gabarin for the duration of the fast. She employs a community cook who prepares rich and balanced meals for as many local people as possible:

Ramadan is a time when you need to eat well to have energy because you are missing your breakfast and lunch. For people who are poor, if someone gives you food during Ramadan, it is someone who really loves you. You give them a taste of wealth psychologically; it will help to uplift their spirits.

When people from her village marry, she contributes useful items such as bedding and mattresses. She has also donated materials for the construction of a mosque in the Dafa Tuwo community. These are more than charitable acts – they form part of a strategy of building community trust.

You must identify the needs that mean the most to the people and work hard to fulfill [those] needs. They will always give you credit for it. Let your people see you regularly – this way you are in touch with what they want, and they can see you and know you still ... care for them.

Within her constituency, she has an excellent relationship with local women. According to the women of Gabarin, she works to meet maternity-related needs, as well as sharing information on how reproductive roles can be made easier. She believes it is important to teach women skills and to make small practical changes they will benefit from:

I taught my women [in the constituency] how to use the ashes from firewood to scrub their pots clean, I bought them water drums to store their water. For example, a food flask can change the life of a woman in the village. She can cook earlier ..., knowing that her food will stay warm, she can have more time for her rest and do other things she wants to do. During Ramadan [5], she does not have to start waking up at 3am to cook again, she has already done that, so she can save firewood and her energy.

Habiba's work for the women of her constituency translates into her activities in the State House. Her bills have always been gender-focused, and she has sponsored two prominent bills focused on improving women's lives. One is the Bill on Maternity Leave (which enables expectant mothers in Bauchi State to take maternity leave and receive full salary for three months). The other is the Girl Child Education Bill, which seeks to prohibit the withdrawal of girls from school before they have finished their secondary school education. It also guarantees free schooling for girls, as well as payment of national examinations fees. Both these Bills have been passed into law.

However, much remains to be done. There does not seem to be a structured approach to the issue of gender oppression, and reforms that offer women relief are carried out in an ad hoc manner. Aside from the above-mentioned laws passed in the Bauchi State House of Assembly and alliances with certain NGOs, there is no systematic programme focusing on strategic skills for the benefit of the women in Darazo constituency. For instance, given the bleak picture of poverty, voicelessness and domestic violence that Habiba draws in describing the women of her constituency, it would seem that information and education about the rights of women under religion should be top priorities for women's empowerment programmes. However, there are only state-wide programmes on micro-credit and basic skills acquisition in place. These do not address the issues of women's human rights, specifically access to and control over decision-making, which would allow women to benefit from the existing economic empowerment programmes. Income-earning opportunities for women, and policies that stress the importance of educating girls are badly needed, but there are no programmes in place to address such issues.

Although she is a party loyalist, Habiba is dissatisfied with the position of women in her party, the PDP. Only one position is reserved for women: that of women's leader at the state level. It is difficult for a woman to reach the position of secretary or state chairperson. Habiba considers this to be exploitative, given the crucial role that women play as mobilisers and voters for the party. She laments:

I don't understand the selfishness of men. The job of the women's leader is just to mobilise women; you don't make decisions for the party, [you serve] only as a link to the women. You are not a member of the NEC (National Executive Council).... We push the lorry until it starts on its way and then the men abandon us, blowing dust in our faces – and we don't even get a ride!

This colourful image reflects social perceptions, which continue to cast women as inferior to men. Habiba contests this:

Men and women are born the same and our brains are all the same. What can make a woman dull is hardship and lack of support and compassion.

The question arises as to whether affirmative action can resolve some of these problems. Habiba's experiences give a fascinating insight into a polity that openly resists affirmative action for women. The PDP used to have a policy of allowing women contestants for political office to collect nomination forms free of charge. Although the party's intentions were ostensibly to create opportunities for women (who generally have less financial clout than men), Habiba feels that this concession was reluctantly given as a result of pressure from women such as herself and from women's NGOs. Also, some elements in the party hierarchy thought that affirmative action for women would hold the loyalty of women in the party, so that they would continue to function as a mobilising and voting force.

However, different people within the party had different agendas. There were those who wanted money regardless, and did not see why they should be deprived of it in the case of female candidates. These included party power brokers who took steps such as hiding nomination forms from aspirant women, thereby forcing them to pay the full costs of nomination or to make a "donation" to the party. There were also those who thought that if women wanted to be taken seriously as contenders in politics, they should contest on the same basis as men. This group regarded affirmative action as discriminatory, arguing that it could not produce female candidates of "quality". Unfortunately, this cohort represents the majority view. According to Habiba:

I am totally in support of helping women by making politics easy for them, but there are too many men within the party who do not know the value of increased participation of women in politics, and [are] therefore opposed it.

Habiba feels that in order for affirmative action to work, more women should argue its merits, explaining the important role it has to play in transforming politics and making structures more equitable and democratic. More women need to participate in politics as women politicians – serious contenders – and not as politicians' women – the "handclapping and ululating mass of humanity who are used and dumped". [6]

Outside of her party, Habiba maintains strong links with a number of women's organisations. She has been a member and office-bearer of the National Council for Women's Societies (NCWS) since 1986. She is also a member of the Federation of Muslim Women of Nigeria (FOMWAN), a progressive organisation of Muslim women, as well as the Women Opinion Leaders Forum (WOLF) and Women's Rights, Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA). She notes that her membership of these organisations confirmed what she had known since childhood – that women are exploited.

Nevertheless, while Habiba recognises the need to protect women's human rights by designing policies and laws that can transform their lives, she remains shrewd about the role

that men can and do play in the realisation of her own political career and is skilled at negotiating the traditionally masculine arenas of political patronage and loyalty. Her agents and facilitators are all young men who owe her loyalty because she has helped them in one way or another. She calls these young male supporters her "lieutenants". One of her campaign managers gave this reason for the level of commitment she inspires: "Ita taamu ce, akoi cikon alkawari. [She is one of our own; she is our choice because she keeps her word.]"

Habiba's experiences of gender discrimination within the Bauchi State House of Assembly itself have been salutary. She describes how her colleagues were initially reluctant to acknowledge her status and standing as an elected official, simply because she was a woman. She had to fight to be recognised as an Honourable Member within the House: I told them, "Stop calling me Hajiya ... I was elected just like every single man in this ... Assembly. Therefore I am an Honourable ... [the] Honourable Habiba Sabo Gabarin." Men have to accept women first as partners in politics and then learn to respect them. In 1999, the Speaker of the Bauchi State House was alleged to have said to Habiba: "You are still a woman and women are under the armpit of men". She did not take this lying down. Using her NGO links, she approached the Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Agency (WRAPA), who then petitioned the Clerk of the Bauchi State House of Assembly, denouncing the derogatory remarks made to Habiba, and demanding that the Speaker retract his words and apologise publicly to Habiba and all Nigerian women within seven days.

Also in 1999, Habiba was involved in a row with the House leadership over the nomination of commissioners for Bauchi State Executive Council. An all-male list of commissioners had been sent to the House for ratification. Habiba objected strongly to the absence of a female commissioner, especially for the position of women's affairs. After numerous appeals went unheard, and after lobbying to no avail, Habiba seized the Mace [7] in order to force the House to reconsider its stance. Eventually, a female commissioner was nominated and approved by the house, along with the other male candidates.

So Habiba is not afraid of open confrontation in arguing for gender equity, and does not hesitate to insist that her male peers treat her with respect. One of them remarked anonymously that:

Honourable Hajiya Habiba represents a challenge many of us are not yet ready for. As a Muslim woman in a Sharia state who is talking about women all the time, it is a problem ... many of the men do not understand the issues. [8]

How does Habiba meet these and other challenges that go with the territory of being a female politician in an often hostile environment? And what advice would she give other women aspiring to a political career? She insists that it is vital to be sure about what one wants, and to make that choice regardless of discouragement.

Hard work is another crucial ingredient. For the May 2003 elections, Habiba had to visit all ten wards within her constituency. She recommends that women politicians begin their political career at the grassroots level, where it is easier to make an impact. A woman politician can build on years of social relations at the local level, converting such resources into political capital.

Perseverance is also critical, Habiba says, pointing to her experiences and setbacks during her NRC and UNCP days. Women in politics must "shine their eyes" [9] carefully. She recommends drawing a power map both within the chosen party and the constituency. She describes this as identifying those who can have the most impact on one's political career,

before committing any funds to lobbying. Lack of funds, she reiterates, is a perennial problem for women in politics:

Unless women do fundraising under a big umbrella of women going into politics, it will be difficult ... resources are very important in politics. “*Siyasa sai da kudi* – politics is money”: look for those men who keep the resources and invite them to the fundraising. They will give. Habiba's frankness about the need to solicit money and patronage from powerful men may seem at odds with a feminist agenda. Nevertheless, her pragmatism has doubtlessly played a large role in her success as a lone female politician in a patriarchal environment. Other Nigerian women have worked as hard in striving for political office, and have indeed won at the polling stations, only to have their victories sabotaged or overturned by party bosses. Habiba, however, has managed to carve out a niche for herself by balancing confrontation with compromise. This enables her to meet her personal goal: to use all the resources at her disposal to ensure the protection of women's human rights.

Footnotes

[1] The literal translation of kalabi tsakanin Rawuna. Habiba was given this appellation on her succession to the State Assembly.

[2] Informal interviews with car-hire drivers in the region of Dutsen Tanshi in Bauchi, February and May 2003.

[3] Telephone conversation with Habiba, 15 May 2003.

[4] The Muslim holy month of fasting from sunrise to sunset.

[5] During the fast, breakfast, which is prepared by women, is eaten between 3 and 5 am.

[6] Josephine Anenih, the National Women's Leader of the PDP, presented this challenge to women politicians at the strategy meeting for repositioning of women politicians in north-eastern Nigeria, 10 June 2003, at Abuja.

[7] The symbol of authority of the legislature, without which the House may not sit or make laws.

[8] Interview with a male politician, 3 May 2003.

[9] Local saying, meaning “Look before you leap”.

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Interviews

Aminu Sabo, son of Habiba, a member of her campaign team and a final-year student of economics at the Bayero University, Kano.

Hajara Sabo, daughter of Habiba, student at Bauchi International School, 3 May 2003.

Mallam Ibrahim, sole surviving uncle and family patriarch of the Gabarin family, Darazo, 3 May 2003.

Campaign managers, Gabarin, 3 May 2003.

Anonymous male politician, 3 May 2003.

Car-hire drivers in the region of Dutsen Tanshi in Bauchi, February and May 2003.

Manager, Programme NTA Bauchi in Bauchi, February 2003.

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