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MYWO has always existed to subdue women's voices and to control the constituency of women, a purpose that was both necessary and effective in an undemocratic state. That it is being revived may indicate the type of politics the elite envision for the foreseeable future

We are witnessing the Kenyan government's attempt to reimpose silence as the preferred political language in this next phase of politics. These attempts are hidden in plain sight. Take for instance the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organisation (MYWO)'s recent public censure of the Member of Parliament for Kandara constituency, Alice Wahome, for [criticising the president](#), or the Women's League of the Kikuyu Council of Elders [demanding](#) that the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI)'s popularisation is the preserve of those aligned to the president.

According to its website, MYWO is a non-governmental organisation of over 25,000 affiliate women's groups and over 4 million individual members. Registered in 1952 by a group of white settler women as part of the colonial government's Department of Community Development and Rehabilitation, its purpose was to focus on women's social welfare, which it did through organising women's self-help groups around the country. In central Kenya where the movement for land, freedom and independence (the Mau Mau) was active, MYWO was treated with suspicion and there were rumours it was used to collect information on Mau Mau activities.

MYWO was initially funded by the colonial government and later the independence government and continued to focus primarily on social welfare and development. The post-independence MYWO continued to act as an appendage of the state, going so far as to merge with the ruling Kenya African

National Union (KANU) party in 1987. MYWO, therefore, has deep roots in the state and the state as an institution for the control of people. It is an organisation by women but not for women; its purpose is to serve the interests of the state.

MYWO has never deviated from its historical roots and purpose. It has never been an independent women's organisation, nor has it ever been invested in women's political agency. Despite being founded and growing as a social welfare and "development" organisation, MYWO gained political relevance as a voice for the ruling party KANU during President Daniel arap Moi's repressive 24-year single-party rule.

Because women were for all intents and purposes excluded from mainstream politics, MYWO was one of the few spaces for politically active women. Thus, some of its chairpersons include such politically active women as: Hon. Phoebe Asiyo, who was first elected in 1980 and was also the first person to table a bill for affirmative action for women's representation in elective politics in 1997; Jael Ogombe Mobogo, who almost beat Mwai Kibaki in the race for Member of Parliament for Bahati Constituency in the 1969 elections; and Ruth Habwe, who was expelled from KANU in 1966 after she dared to run against KANU as an independent. Other chairpersons of MYWO include such prominent women as Hon. Zipporah Kittony, who was first nominated by President Moi as a KANU MP in 1988 and again by Gideon Moi, President Moi's son and the Chairman of KANU, to the Senate 25 years later in 2013; and Jane Kiano, who was also a patron of the organisation until her death in 2018.

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However, MYWO's influence began to decline during the "second liberation" as demands for multipartyism grew and civic space expanded. As the public space for women expanded, including through the promulgation of the Constitution in 2010, MYWO continued to shrink. Its resurgence to chastise Alice Wahome for criticising the president is, therefore, [worth reflection](#). It is also worth noting that President Uhuru Kenyatta first ran on a KANU ticket and his political mentor was President Moi.

For the first time in our history, men and women form a class of citizens, neither with superior status, and both with the right to representation in elective and appointive bodies. Yet over the past decade, and especially in the last seven years, we have witnessed some of the most hardened resistance by the state to women as citizens — from systematic violations of the Constitution to exclude women from Parliament, Cabinet, and parastatal and ambassadorial appointments (as required by the Bill of Rights Article 27) to laws undermining their equality in marriage and the increase in violence against women by men in the public and private spheres.

In other words, there has been no shortage of "women's issues" over the past decade. Women and women's organisations working in women's interests have had to demand, advocate and fight for women against the state despite the law - from court cases challenging these unconstitutional actions by Parliament and by the president to public advocacy for compliance with the rule of law to ensure women's full representation in public space and politics. Women working for and on behalf of women have been at the forefront of challenging state illegalities that harm women, undermine their citizenship and limit their opportunities. During this time MYWO has been missing in action.

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Elders, is because they aren't concerned with or working in the interests of Kenyan women generally; they are working for and in the interests of the state and a minority of women within the establishment. MYWO certainly does not protect the interests of women as a class of citizens. This isn't to argue that their position is invalid or does not deserve a platform but to provide context and to assert it is not **the** women's position.

MYWO was established to subdue women's voices and to control the constituency of women, a purpose that was both necessary and effective in an undemocratic state. That it is being revived may indicate the type of politics the elite envision for the future of women in the country. The Kikuyu Council of Elders is the preserve of men, and the emergence of a "women's league" in a notoriously misogynistic institution is probably a sign that the interests and positions being advanced are those of men.

The homogenisation of women

Women have been speaking for the past decade on issues of national importance. Where are those voices of women who have been speaking when it wasn't convenient or politically expedient? Indeed, what the 2010 Constitution did to the consternation of the political elite is to create opportunities for the largest number of women in Kenyan politics - women who demand public space and national platforms without apology and on the same terms as men, women who speak against the state's failure to protect women.

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But the way in which women who have been speaking for and on behalf of women against the state are being covered today is an attempt to homogenise women, to deny women the right to multiple and diverse opinions (see how this is consistent with a view of women as not real citizens). A small class of politically active women are also trying use the media to manipulate the public into seeing them as the "leaders" of the constituency of women so that they can leverage this standing to secure positions in the negotiated politics that is the fashion post-BBI.

Women are insulted, raped and killed and MYWO is silent, but a woman politician doing politics in a way that upsets the establishment is a cause for national statements. No woman with an issue - from the alienation of inheritance land or rape of her daughter in a public high school, or even the death of her daughter allegedly by a governor - runs to MYWO. However, the state runs to MYWO when it has issues with women.

To deny women diverse political opinions is to deny us the fullness of citizenship; it serves to infantilise us as well as to deny us agency at a time when the political elite is most vulnerable. Our politics is bad but it isn't simple. Attempts by the political elite to gloss over differences or muzzle dissent should be met with suspicion. The only way citizens can influence the direction or agenda of politics is through critical political engagement not mere acquiescence.

MYWO's resurgence, especially in the role of the disciplinarian of women doing politics, is a harbinger of a politics without basic freedoms: freedom of association and speech, not just for women, but all citizens. The nature of our popular, predominately male, political analysis is to render anything articulated by a woman as peripheral to the national discourse and only for the consumption of other women. Whereas men speak and do politics for the public, women speak and

do politics only for other women.

This analytical framework fails to take cognisance of changes in society, as well as the expanded public and political role of women, especially post-2010. In addition, it is stubbornly ahistorical, ignoring this administration's history of violating women's rights as a prelude to more expansive and systematic repression. We see the same modus operandi with court orders. The Parliament and the president have consistently violated court orders on the two-thirds gender rule, including refusing to enact legislation on women's representation and naming an unconstitutional cabinet. Now court orders are violated to deny some citizens the right to enter the country, as well as release them on bail.

We would do well to broaden our political analysis to take women's role seriously as citizens with agency and with diverse political perspectives and, therefore, as proponents of both progressive and regressive politics. Part of what is most threatening in the current context is diversity of political opinion, complexity and nuance among all citizens, not just women.

MYWO and organisations like it are *telling* women what the proper political position is, thus pulling women back from complicating the public space by demanding to be heard. This is especially damaging for women because women as a class of citizens have legitimate litigated grievances that challenge the legality and legitimacy of any proposed referendum or constitutional amendment processes.

Why women are critically important is because none of the legal processes to amend the Constitution are available because these institutions are unconstitutional as they exclude women. We have an unconstitutional cabinet, an unconstitutional Parliament, an unconstitutional electoral body and a political elite that have all but admitted that elections are hijacked by those in power. The scope of the current illegalities would seem to exclude the current holders of those positions from initiating or overseeing any constitutional amendment process. Instead of an unconstitutional government overseeing amendments to the Constitution, what we should have is an independent transitional government. But the political elite know that this political moment works in their collective interest only if it is a binary choice, uncomplicated by facts and the law.

As citizens we would do well to be suspicious of those seeking to silence us or to mould us into well-packaged constituencies, whether they be organised around ethnicity, gender or age, for sale to the highest bidder. We are being encouraged to consider political choices that are both illegal and ahistorical and questioning the framing is considered heresy. We seem to have learned nothing from the silencing of critics and the faux "tyranny of numbers" scenario.

Shrinking the political space, especially the space to disagree and oppose the status quo, is bad for citizens and great for politicians. The politics of silence is the politics of oppression; it merely starts with women but will eventually silence and oppress all citizens equally.

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