

WiPP in Sudan

At the invitation of one of our Associates, the Pink Shoe Club, I was invited to join a delegation from Parliament to observe the Referendum in Sudan. The trip was sponsored by the Muslim Hands charity and was led by Lord Ahmed of Rotherham, who you will recall went to Sudan to negotiate the return of the “teddy bear teacher”, Gillian Gibbons.



The delegation was keen to have someone on the team to focus on women’s participation and I was more than delighted to join the group. In addition us, the Conservatives were represented by Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP, Stephen Williams was there on behalf of the Anglo-Sudanese Lawyers Association, and Taysir Ali was our translator..

We flew out overnight to the southern capital, Juba where we were warmly greeted at the airport by members of the South Sudan Islamic Council, and an Al Jazeera television crew. After dropping off our bags at the hotel, we set off to visit 3 polling stations. One was under a tree, the second in a science laboratory and the third was in a tent! There was a huge turnout of over 95% so it was immediately clear that female participation was equal to that of men. In fact, in one polling station, we were told that 60% of the registered voters were women.



The other way women were participating was as Polling Centre officials and as election Observers. Many of them were members of women’s voluntary groups and organisations, including South Sudan Women’s General Association, Youth for Separation and South Sudan Human Development Organisation. They were all keen play an active role in the election and in the anticipated new nation.

In the morning of the following day, the delegation met with members of the South Sudan Islamic Council. I was disappointed to note that there was not a single woman amongst the 24 members. There was a lot of talk and enthusiasm for the “birth of a new nation” and I felt it appropriate to remind them that there could be no births without mothers! I urged them to promote the skills and talents of their sisters, mothers and daughters. I was assured that women are regarded equally – but it was not evident at that meeting.



We then flew up to Khartoum to meet with senior politicians in the North. We met with the Vice-President, Members of the Council of Ministers, academics and the British Ambassador, Nicholas Kay (check out his blog www.sudanwatch.blogspot.com). I was also delighted to meet two (of eight) women Ministers. The Minister of Social Development, Afaf Ahamed Abdalrahman, and the Minister of Information, Sanaa Hamad Elawad. We talked about Sudan as a bridge between African and Arab countries. How significantly women are active in public life – they hold half the senior positions in Tribal Courts and in Qur’anic Schools. Women also make up over half the university population with a high percentage studying to be doctors. I was told that women have free choice about the number of children they bear – an average of 3 children in the North, and 9 in the South.

Our meetings finished at half past midnight and we had to get up again for our return flight at 3am! As you can imagine, it was a pretty tiring trip – but worth every second.

Before leaving for Sudan, I visited the only Polling Station for Sudanese living in the whole of Europe. It just happened to be in front of our own Parliament, in Westminster Central Hall. Again, women were present and playing an active role in the election as voters, officials and observers. Voters had travelled from Russia, Ireland and Continent to express their opinion on succession. Official results are due in early February but it seems clear from the initial, unofficial, results that over 97% of the people of South Sudan want independence.



Liz St Clair
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