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## Women and Politics in Afghanistan: How to use the chance of the 25 % quota for women?

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- The 25% women's quota for the future Afghan parliament is an enormous chance for women to participate in politics, a quota even more progressive than in most other Asian countries.
- The quota does not guarantee by itself a strong participation because the practice of using women merely for window-dressing is widespread in Afghanistan.
- Lack of security is the main obstacle to more participation of women in Afghan politics.
- Politics and parties have a bad name in Afghanistan and are considered as male domains.
- Women so far lack the leadership skills needed to build up an effective network.

The parliamentary elections in Afghanistan scheduled for spring 2005 offer enormous chances for women to participate in politics. According to the new constitution, at least 25% of the delegates in the parliament have to be women. This is more than in most other Asian countries.

However, the mere presence of women in the parliament will not automatically give them their share of influence on decision making processes. The experiences with the Emergency and the Constitutional Loya Jirga (national councils in June 2002 and December 2003) have raised concerns that many of the female delegates will serve mainly symbolic purposes in order to comply with the expectations of the international community. Many of them will be sent and instructed by men with no women's rights on the agenda.

In fact, very few women in Afghanistan are politically active today. Those who want to become active, face a number of serious limitations.

### Former warlords limit women's participation in politics

Lack of security is mentioned by most women as the first and foremost limitation in exercising their political rights. In large parts of the country, warlords and their private militias are still exercising their arbitrary rule. The central government has not managed so far to extend its authority to all provinces. The DDR program designed to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate former militia fighters has moved much slower than hoped for and many warlords have boycotted the program. These militias have direct links to political parties that are actively taking part in the government as well as in the elections. Their presence in politics is seriously hindering women's participation in politics, as most of these parties have a record of gross human rights abuses, particularly against women, and some of them follow radical Islamist ideologies. Apart from that, in the Southern and Southeastern part of the country, members of the radical Islamist Taliban have frequently attacked civilians in order to disrupt the preparations for the elections.

In this context, intimidation tactics against politically active women seem to be widespread. A survey conducted by Human Rights Watch (to be published soon) indicates that many politically active women frequently receive threats via telephone or email. How far these have to be taken seriously is difficult to say. But the fear is definitely there, fueled by the experiences of the past, as most Afghans have lost family members or friends due to politically motivated violence.

While most cases of political violence against women will remain unreported, some high profile cases have been publicized. Safia Sediqi, an adviser to the rural development minister, reportedly escaped an attempted ambush near Jalalabad in July. The Loya Jirga delegate Suraya Parlika was reportedly shot at on her balcony in Kabul in August. The Loya Jirga delegate Malalai Joya, who spoke out at the Constitutional Loya Jirga against the participation of warlords, is still under constant protection. The head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, Dr. Sima Samar, says she is frequently receiving death threats and is therefore not participating in big rallies and official gatherings.

According to UN reports, a number of female candidates for the Emergency and the Constitutional Loya Jirga withdrew their candidacies after being threatened or attacked. Even during the Loya Jirgas women were harassed and felt intimidated by the strong presence of former warlords and their supporters. Given the inability and unwillingness of the security forces to follow up these kinds of incidents, they are very likely to happen again during the campaigning for the parliamentary elections next year. In fact, fear of violence is likely to stop many female candidates from campaigning all too publicly. Human Rights Watch is already reporting cases of police harassment against future female candidates who collected voters' cards (a precondition for filling their candidacy).

Apart from violence, politically active women are subject to many other forms of pressure. A number of female Loya Jirga delegates faced discrimination by their employers or members of their communities after returning from the Loya Jirga.

### **Strategies for women's emancipation need to be adapted to local realities**

Women are much more at risk than men, since their participation in politics is by itself a contested political symbol. As one woman from the FES-women's network put it: "Most of our people link democracy to women. They think that democracy means that their wives, sisters and daughters will no longer listen to them. They believe democracy is against Afghan culture and against our religion." From the beginning of modern Afghan politics, women's rights have always been a major issue in the struggle between modernist and conservative forces.

Denouncing politically active women as non-Islamic has become a common strategy amongst conservative circles, who perceive women's emancipation as a threat to their own power. As a consequence, many politically active women make it a point to stress their Muslim identity and their Afghan values. They are demanding to include fathers, brothers and husbands as target groups into women's rights programs. And they are calling for political awareness programs as a first step towards empowering women in politics.

Those who have enough knowledge about the Islamic sources, fight conservative circles with their own weapons, pointing to those passages in the Quran or the Hadiths (sayings of the prophet) that underline women's political rights. That is why many politically active women perceive Islamic knowledge as an important tool for emancipation.

It is important that western organizations who work in the field of women's rights respect these strategies and do not force their own concepts and pace of emancipation onto their female project partners. To some extent, violence against politically active women might have been fueled by an unbalanced focus of the international community on women's issues. In the eyes of some Afghans, this has discredited women's participation in politics as westernization that goes against Islam and Afghan tradition.

In this context, it would be useful to encourage exchange programs with women activists from other Islamic or Asian countries rather than sending experts from Western countries.

A number of FES programs have shown that Afghan women take great interest in the experiences of Muslim and Asian women in neighboring countries and are eager to accept them as role models.

Further, efforts should be made to co-opt rather than alienate moderate men – especially local power holders like mullahs, khans, officials, party heads - in the struggle for emancipation. This is a long and tenuous process, since even those men who claim to support the participation of women in politics like to praise them as mothers rather than leaders in society. They like to use the image of the family to portray the relation between men and women as harmonious with no need for change. In fact, the presidential candidate Masooda Jalal is very much capitalizing on this discourse, stressing her virtues as a mother. However, the moment women step out of this prescribed role, claiming economic independence, they tend to be seen as trouble makers and threatening to the fabric of society – even by moderate men. Moving too fast in the struggle for emancipation can easily trigger a conservative backlash with unwanted consequences.

Political awareness programs for men and women are needed to change the image of politics in people's minds. After decades of war, politics has a bad name in Afghanistan. It is almost seen as an illegal activity. As a consequence, many socially active women do not want to be associated with politics. Rather, they want to be active in NGOs, which they see as explicitly non-political.

Politics is seen as a men's world that is inappropriate for women. This has also very practical implications. Being in parliament will mean mingling with men. It will mean being away from home beyond the security of the family. For many Afghan women and especially their families this is unacceptable. The honor of the family very much depends on the public reputation of the woman of the house. At the same time, many women use their family's name as a major asset in politics.

Beliefs are widespread in Afghanistan that women are simply not capable of doing politics, because they are believed to be too emotional. It might therefore be difficult for

male candidates to even receive women's votes. Likewise, these traditional values might make women hesitant to take up positions of power. Strengthening their self-confidence therefore needs to be part of an empowering strategy.

Many middle class women fear that these prejudices will be reinforced by a high number of uneducated and illiterate women in parliament. They therefore argue that women should be educated first and only then be encouraged to actively participate in politics. What is not considered here is that many men in parliament will also be uneducated.

Besides all limitations, there will be more than 60 women in Afghanistan's future parliament. Their mere presence might contribute more than any awareness program to a redefinition of the political.

At the moment, many active women are still pursuing a wait-and-see policy, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of a candidacy. Any political strategy to empower women in the political process therefore has to start with identifying eligible female candidates for the elections, building their capacity and political awareness and encouraging them to run for parliament.

### **The women's quota in parliament is no guarantee for women's empowerment**

According to Article 83 of the Afghan Constitution and Article 23 of the Electoral Law, the number of female delegates in the lower house of the parliament, the Wolesi Jirga, must be at least twice the number of existing provinces. Given the current 32 provinces, this means that 64 or more than 25% of the 249 delegates will be women. From each province at least two women will be represented, with the exception of those provinces that only have two seats all together – from here at least one woman will be elected.

The fact that the women are being elected and not appointed (as in countries like Bangladesh), can be seen as a major success. It gives women the chance to gain experience in campaigning for the elections and to build up their own constituency, however weak. It will also give them more legitimacy in the parlia-

ment and a sense of accountability towards their voters.

Who will these women be? Will they have the capacity and the will to fully exercise their rights as parliamentarians? What kind of mechanisms might obstruct them in their political work?

A study in Pakistan on the women's quota in local government<sup>1</sup> revealed that the majority of women councilors did not have any political background or knowledge. They contested in the elections because they were persuaded by men in the family or by influential people in their community with the aim of forwarding their own agenda. However, it was also found that even those women brought in for window-dressing were not content with that role and struggled for more. By being in parliament, they had the chance to learn the art of politics in practice.

Similar experiences have been reported by Loya Jirga delegates. Many of them complained that the majority of female delegates were sent and instructed by parties of former Mujaheddin for merely symbolic purposes. Reportedly, they held speeches written for them without understanding their meaning. As one woman from the FES women's network put it, "most women were not there by interest, they were sent by jihadis. They were told what to vote for. They will not work for women's rights." For example, some women reportedly brought in a draft law for the hijab (full body veil with eyes uncovered) to be made compulsory in the constitution. They also reportedly voted against the quota for women in parliament and even beat up one woman who did vote in favor of the quota.

While these kind of divisions prevented women from actively working together for women's rights, a number of successes were achieved: Equal rights were explicitly guaranteed for men and women. A 25% quota for women in parliament is guaranteed, although the initial constitutional draft only provided for 12,5%.

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<sup>1</sup> Bari, Farzana (2002) "Women's Representation in Politics: The Way Ahead", in: Waseem, Mohammad (ed.). Electoral Reform in Pakistan. Published by FES Pakistan.

Some independent candidates reported that it was due to the lobbying of a small but effective group of women that these laws were included in the constitution. They approached U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and UN Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi. They also brokered the assistance of male delegates from moderate or minority parties, trading their own votes on certain issues like the national language against votes for women's rights. This gave them a sense of empowerment.

In fact, some women who were brought in by Mujaheddin parties reportedly voted against the party line when it came to women's issues. Another important moment was the election of a female Vice-Chair at the Emergency Loya Jirga, which gave women a sense of unity.

### **The need for female networking**

In Afghanistan the international community has pushed strongly for the inclusion of women in all spheres of life. "Women's participation is the fashion of the day", many people say. Women's official positions however might not always comply with the responsibilities entrusted on them. One high official complained that she was only used for window-dressing in the administration, but was not allowed to take any decisions. Another women's rights activist made a similar statement for political parties: "Women are used by parties. They are made deputy and shown around. See, we have a female deputy." In order to go against these kind of practices, women need to build up networks and stand up together, for example in a common campaign.

So far, the level of organization and cooperation amongst women is rather weak. Female networking and the building of a broad platform of women are essential in the struggle for women's emancipation in Afghanistan. Historically, there has never been an organized bottom-up women's movement. Most women's rights in Afghan history were granted from the top. That is why many activists today stress that women need to fight for their rights rather than rights being granted to them due to international pressure. "I don't blame the Taliban alone for taking away the rights of the women. I also blame the women

for not having stood up for their rights", says a female judge.

Others have pointed out that mistrust and jealousy are ripe amongst women activists today, which of course counts for men, too. A young woman said at the FES-conference on "Women and Politics" in Kunduz in August 2004: "It is clear that we do not tolerate each other as women. The limitations that women face in politics do not only come from men, they partly come from women themselves." The head of another women's NGO said: "If another woman is better than themselves, they try to harm her by spreading what she has done in the past and spoiling her reputation."

After more than a decade of civil war, it might not be surprising that Afghan women are just as divided along ethnic and ideological lines as men. Apart from that, women's chances to build up common networks and institutions were curtailed by restrictions on their movement in public under Mujaheddin and Taliban rule.

The divisions might have been deepened by the mushrooming of NGOs after the fall of the Taliban regime. Donor practices promoted the founding of numerous small or even one-person NGOs by women. The competition for donor money might have promoted a culture of non-cooperation.

Effective cooperation needs not only time and willingness, but also skills: How to design a strategy, how to facilitate a political discussion, how to lead a group, how to structure an organization. Sweeta Noori, head of Women for Women International, says: "Women try to work together more than before, but they lack good leadership skills." These skills can only be build up by systematic training with the help of international organizations.

There have been attempts to co-ordinate women's political activities. In June, a "Preparatory Committee for the Participation of Women in Politics" was founded with the support of the international organizations NDI, UNIFEM, FES, DED and GTZ. Although there have been weekly meetings with a good attendance of mostly around 30 women, the

committee lacks a clear strategy three months after founding. This is mainly due to a lack of leadership, but also of commitment on some sides. "Many women go to the committee, because they want to get scholarships and keep the closeness to the donor organizations", says one member. Nonetheless, this should be seen as a learning process which might be more effective than any seminar. Promoting women's networking and exchange can help to build a culture of tolerance, to identify common interests amongst women and to work out a common strategy – even if this does not happen over night.

In the forefront of the presidential elections, women's issues are not high on the agenda. Most politically active women are busy campaigning for one or the other candidate. The election process is very much characterized by personalized politics and not by party programs. The only female candidate has not made women's rights a major issue.

After the presidential elections, one might hope that politics might become more issue-based. In this period it will be crucial to establish women's rights as a relevant topic in the election campaigns and force candidates to take a position on this issue.

#### **Parties are not attractive for women**

Just like Masooda Jalal, most politically active women act as individuals with only loose alliances behind them. The number of women who are members of political parties is very low. This is a phenomenon that can be found in many post-conflict countries (for example in East Timor). During the war, politics has become militarized and therefore inaccessible for women. At the same time, violence against women has excluded them from all spheres of society and has made it impossible for women to build up alternative political structures. While many of today's parties in Afghanistan do have a women's section, this is often run like an NGO with weaving and literacy classes for women. Many of the female party members entered the parties because of family relations.

The incentives for joining a party before the elections are very low, for men and for women. Parties have a bad name in Afghanistan. They are made responsible for the civil

war. Party politics is equaled to criminal activities, fighting and acting for personal benefits. That is why most women strongly emphasize their independence as candidates. Masooda Jalal even stresses her lack of experience in politics as a point that qualifies her for the position of the president. The message behind this: Anyone is better than those who participated in the Afghan civil war.

Running as an independent candidate is further promoted by the election law which gives voters only one vote for a candidate, but no vote for a party. Therefore, party members cannot be voted for via their party list. There are a number of newly established democratic parties, which are still weak. Many of them are expected to disintegrate again after the elections.

With the quota system in place, parties are likely to try and get more women into their lines in order to secure their influence in parliament. They might not be interested in self-conscious women, though. "They like to take women who speak their language", says one independent Loya Jirga delegate. Political parties therefore need to be lobbied and persuaded of the long-term advantages of having strong women in their rows and campaigning on women's issues to get women's votes.

In many parts of the country, it will be very difficult for independent female candidates to compete with women from Mujaheddin parties for the reserved seats, let alone with men.

They lack the financial and organizational resources as well as the skills to run an efficient campaign. Apart from that, many women fear that warlords' parties will use their money and weapons to force their candidates into parliament.

Nonetheless, the Bonn Agreement and the new constitution have opened many new doors for women to participate in politics and other social spheres, especially in the cities. Much of this was totally unexpected only three years ago. Self-confident Afghan women are present in the government and in civil society. This is especially true for Kabul but also for the provincial centers. Many men would not dare anymore to organize an event without guaranteeing an adequate female participation. Women are earning a family's living, are driving cars, and use public spheres, such as cinemas or tea shops: First signs of a revival of former women's emancipation in the cities as known in the 1970s. And hopeful signs for the new generation of girls who is now allowed to attend schools and universities. Many of these girls dream of a professional future in high-ranking positions and they definitely bear a high peace potential, having experienced the dark times of civil war and exclusion from public life.

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