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“The Wolesi Jirga parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in Afghanistan on September 18, 2010. The Independent Election Commission’s recently announced list of candidates includes nearly 400 women, a 22 percent increase over the number of parliamentary candidates from five years ago. Such positive trends must be allowed to continue, requiring practical measures aimed at structural issues and cultural constraints left unresolved from prior elections.”

Real Change for Afghan Women's Rights: Opportunities and Challenges in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections

Summary

- Free and fair elections in Afghanistan are a crucial element of the nation’s future stability. Women, as half the country’s population, are a largely untapped resource in ensuring lasting stability and progress.
- Positive upward trends in women’s participation must continue. This will require practical measures aimed at structural issues and cultural constraints that remain unresolved from prior elections.
- Several key issues—including a lack of female polling center staff and observers, and unequal access to campaigning rights and resources—impede women’s political participation.
- Resolving these key issues—by mobilizing women’s networks, increasing coordination between local Afghan and international organizations, among other measures—will contribute to a more effective and immediate change in the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 18.
- Involvement of and outreach to women cannot be a last-minute activity, but instead must be an integral aspect of electoral preparations. Involving women from the beginning will ensure that the Independent Election Commission (IEC) takes into account cultural and practical considerations and fosters an increasingly favorable environment for women’s continued political participation.

Introduction

During 2009’s presidential and provincial council elections in Afghanistan, two women ran for president, seven for vice president, and about 38 percent of the 4.5 million newly registered voters were female (although official registration figures do not account for significant over-registration that likely occurred due to voter card fraud).¹ These numbers represent a historic increase in Afghan women’s political participation and give a sense of the remarkable strides Afghan women have been making toward greater political participation, both as voters and as candidates.

At the same time that these figures inspire optimism, a number of obstacles still impedes women’s full political participation. Though equal enfranchisement for women exists on paper, as codified in the Afghanistan Constitution and Afghan Electoral Law, prevailing cultural and social norms continue to challenge women’s equal participation in reality. Aside from physical insecurity,

which remains a risk for all Afghans, Afghan women face additional social constraints that limit their ability to participate in the political process. The public and political domain, for instance, is commonly regarded as a space reserved for males, and some Afghan women feel they need permission from their husbands or families to vote or run for office.

Such social norms can also facilitate proxy voting and other forms of electoral fraud. As women's voter ID cards do not contain photographs, women are particularly susceptible to identity fraud in the voter registration process. In culturally conservative communities, women are typically not permitted to interact with unrelated men, including male voter registration officials. Therefore, it is common in some areas for male family members to give electoral officials invalid numbers of women in their families and receive the claimed number of registration cards without providing any proof. This distorts the picture of women's real participation in the electoral process, and enables communities that claim large numbers of female registrants to receive additional ballots on election day that can be used for fraud.

The practice of proxy voting occurs when a man, aided by corrupt or culturally sympathetic election officials, is allowed to fill out ballots on behalf of all the female members of his family on election day. Such practices undermine women's fundamental legal right to vote on their own behalf, as Afghan Electoral Law requires, and can skew the tally in favor of candidates that male members of the family prefer. In the process, proxy voting also artificially inflates female participation numbers and makes it difficult to obtain true counts of female participation levels.

Free and fair elections in Afghanistan are a crucial element of the nation's future stability. Women, as half the country's population, are a largely untapped resource in ensuring lasting progress. As the Five Million Afghan Women Campaign stated in a declaration last year, full democracy is unattainable without women's independent and active participation, and all Afghan women must realize the value of their votes and consider their social responsibility in participating in elections.²

The upcoming Wolesi Jirga parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in Afghanistan on September 18, 2010. The Independent Election Commission's recently announced list of candidates includes nearly 400 women, a 22 percent increase over the number of parliamentary candidates from five years ago.³ Such positive trends must continue, requiring practical measures aimed at structural issues and cultural constraints left unresolved from prior elections. Resolution of these key issues will foster an increasingly favorable environment for women's continued political participation.

Cultural and Structural Limitations

The most pressing need to increase female electoral participation is to ensure a physically and culturally safe space for women to cast their votes. In many cases, this amounts to having enough qualified women to staff each female polling station so that women are not forced to interact with unknown men on polling day (male and female polling stations are separated in Afghanistan). Therefore, a major obstacle to women's participation in the 2009 elections was a critical lack of female staff at female polling centers. On election day, 36 percent of polling staff were female, but they were more heavily stationed in urban areas and insufficient to cover all female polling centers nationwide.⁴

Faced with a shortage of female workers and inadequate recruitment, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) filled the remaining staff positions at female polling centers with male employees (in some cases elderly men, who are deemed more acceptable interlocutors with unrelated women in conservative areas). In certain conservative areas of the country, women are culturally

constrained from interacting with men outside of the home, or from confirming their identity to men. Thus, the presence of male workers at female polling centers effectively deterred a number of potential female voters from casting ballots or from entering polling centers altogether.

A related problem has been a shortage of female observers and “candidate agents.” (Candidate agents work specifically on behalf of a candidate or political party to protect their interests in the polling process; observers are neutral and report violations that affect any participant in the process.) Without the presence of neutral female observers in these stations, the likelihood for proxy voting, vote manipulation, and other fraudulent electoral practices is drastically increased. This was particularly true for female candidates in provincial elections last year, who complained of their inability to recruit or train agents to observe on their behalf.

In addition to these cultural constraints, women are also limited in where they may go. In last year's elections, the IEC initially housed voter registration locations in government offices and police stations, overlooking that it is often culturally inappropriate for women to visit these places on their own. Though IEC provincial officials were later given authority to change locations, shifting the places at that late point may have also deterred full registration. Such location concerns, noted in the voter registration phase, reoccurred on polling day, with the added difficulty that many polling stations were also situated too far from numerous residential areas. As FEFA (Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan) observed, “to simplify, what is easily accessible for women is definitely accessible for men, but what is accessible for men is not necessarily easily accessible to women as well.”⁵

Female political candidates also face significant obstacles to participation in the campaign process because of social restrictions within the public arena and their access to capital needed to finance campaigns. In more conservative areas of the country, it is considered inappropriate for women to speak to men at public rallies, or for them to place posters with their photo in public spaces—both critical needs when campaigning in areas with very low literacy. Women-specific gatherings or campaign spaces are a possible solution, but require resources and political will for support. Women also have more difficulty raising campaign funds than men. While women typically run households, men often ultimately control where family resources are spent and may not support spending money on campaign materials, transportation costs to neighboring districts and so forth. Without adequate campaigning ability and without an equal allocation of resources, women are faced with an uneven playing field and may not garner the requisite support to fairly compete in elections.

Practical Solutions

Many of the aforementioned challenges can be mitigated by relatively simple solutions, but ones that require greater coordination and communication between Afghan and international stakeholders historically have been lacking. Real change for women's rights in the upcoming elections will depend in part on increased interchange between the IEC, Afghan women's networks and other international organizations working on the ground in Afghanistan. The following practical solutions are ones that can begin right now and can positively impact the September elections. These strategies may also yield more immediate results, as they do not rely on long-term capacity-building or transforming cultural and social norms.

First, to avoid the female staffing shortages seen in the last elections, Afghan women's networks must be mobilized to help recruit and train women to staff the centers in coordination with the IEC. Organizations such as the Afghan Women Network (AWN), the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and UNIFEM must support one another in identifying qualified candidates and

motivating these women to apply for IEC staff positions. These networks, in identifying candidates, can also assist in vetting potential candidates to ensure that workers at polling centers are not relatives of particular candidates, which could perpetuate fraud. The IEC must also raise recruitment concerns as an urgent matter in press conferences or public briefings so that the issue does not go unaddressed until too late in the election cycle.

Access to information about elections and available positions or needs is crucial not only to recruit sufficient numbers of female staff, but also to ensure their active and effective participation. For example, in the 2009 elections, UNIFEM assisted in poster campaigns, and other organizations in radio broadcasts in attempt to help the IEC recruit women. However, because these efforts began too late in the electoral process, they were largely ineffective in 2009. This year, organizations already conducting voter education and outreach, such as IFES-STEP (Independent Foundation for Electoral Systems—Support to the Electoral Process) and the Movement of Afghan Sisters, can work with the IEC to spread the message about recruiting needs and staff responsibilities.

Support from the male community and religious leaders is also critical to mobilize female recruitment and participation. If time is taken to explain that voting need not violate community or religious norms—by having women interact with women in the process, for example—such influential leaders can assist in endorsing training and educational programs for women and in encouraging communities to respond to IEC public outreach.

As a second solution, women's networks can help in identifying and recruiting female observers for FEFA and female agents that can work in polling stations where female candidates expect to receive support. National organizations like MOWA, AWN, and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) can work with international organizations like UNIFEM, UNDP ELECT and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to get the word out at the community level. This mobilization should include media outreach, particularly through radio announcements or text messaging.

Observers and agents are only effective, however, if they understand the electoral regulations and know what to look for to detect fraud. Therefore, once observers are recruited, women's networks can capitalize on international organizations working in the area to offer training to both observers and female candidate agents. A pool of well-informed observers can help prevent proxy voting or ballot stuffing. There are several programs run by international and local stakeholders in the region. The National Democratic Institute (NDI), for example, assisted in the 2009 presidential election by strengthening the capacity of candidate polling agents to observe and report, and by using a pool of Afghan trainers to train other agents about effective election administration and the rights and obligations of polling agents.

Third, any increase in female polling staff and observers must be coupled by greater transparency by the IEC with respect to female voting statistics. It was clear to observers on the ground in 2009 that distortion of female ballots was a significant factor in presidential and provincial council voting fraud. The IEC refused, however, to release gender-specific data about the voting process. In the 2010 and future Afghan elections, the IEC must be more transparent first about where it plans to locate female polling stations and how many there will be. This information is important for the recruitment effort of female polling staff and observers. The IEC must also publish turnout figures that are broken down by male and female polling stations. Without disaggregated gender-specific voting statistics, it is much more difficult to detect ballot stuffing or proxy voting. If, for example, a male polling station in a conservative and insecure district has an average of 100 votes per polling station, and an equal number of female polling stations records an average of 300 votes, this would be a bright red flag that fraud occurred. This transparency will provide useful data to track the actual participation of female voters, as well as enhance electoral integrity.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief highlights key issues that must be resolved to ensure Afghan women's continued political participation in the upcoming parliamentary elections on September 18, 2010 and beyond. Scott Worden is a senior rule of law adviser at USIP and served as an international commissioner on the Electoral Complaints Commission during the 2009 elections. Nina Sudhakar is research assistant in the Gender and Peacebuilding Initiative. This brief is co-sponsored by USIP's Centers of Innovation, including the Gender and Peacebuilding Initiative and the Rule of Law program.

Fourth, resources must be mobilized in order to enhance female candidates' abilities to promote themselves. Afghan Electoral Law prohibits international funds from being given directly to campaigns, but international funds can support general information campaigns about the elections, or support media forums for political debates. National resources must also be leveraged to support female candidates. AWN and other Afghan civil society organizations can sponsor "safe havens" or women's forums in which female candidates could safely campaign. In addition to physical campaigning space, media outlets can also be encouraged to provide a forum in which women candidates, through special programs, can focus on and discuss campaign issues. Such politically-focused gatherings and forums would not only increase the strength of women's network ties, but also would promote active civic participation and encourage more female political hopefuls to run for office. Creative solutions can also be found to avoid conservative social norms. For example, in areas where publishing posters of female candidates was impossible in 2009, women passed around business cards with their candidate numbers and platforms within trusted private circles.

Finally, perhaps the most effective strategy to enable women's participation will be to involve women early on in planning and implementing upcoming elections. Last year's election cycle cautioned that the involvement of and outreach to women cannot be a mere afterthought or last-minute activity, but must be an integral aspect of election preparations. Involving women from the beginning will ensure that the IEC takes into account cultural and practical factors, such as polling center locations and staffing concerns by recruiting greater numbers of staff or setting up more mobile polling centers.

Women's involvement in election planning and implementation may be achieved by capitalizing on the Gender Unit created by the IEC three months before last year's elections. This Gender Unit, which was established to focus on mainstreaming gender concerns into election planning, must be made into a viable and effective entity. As NDI observed, this unit was informed and supported by IFES and UNDP-ELECT, but had little ability to influence the IEC leadership's decisions. In addition, it was formed too late to address many of the problems women faced during the registration and voting process of the 2009 election cycle. In the lead-up to the September parliamentary elections, this unit must start meeting early and often, and must wield some influence with the IEC in order to ensure that suggestions are duly taken into consideration. The Gender Unit would also benefit from meeting regularly with women's networks and international organizations in order to facilitate an ongoing and active discourse geared towards coordinated problem solving.



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Endnotes

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