

The evolving role of women in Pakistani politics

By Huma Yusuf

■ Executive summary

In Pakistan's upcoming general elections on March 11th 2013 only 36 women are contesting general National Assembly seats on political party tickets, up from 34 in the 2008 elections. This low number contradicts overall trends whereby a growing number of women are contesting elections as independent candidates and more women are registered to vote than ever before. Despite these indicators, Pakistan's political parties have done little in this election cycle to facilitate women's participation in the political process. This is owing to fears of low female voter turnout and the consequence of local government systems that have prevented political parties from cultivating female candidates at the grass-roots level.

Pakistan's outgoing National Assembly – the first one in the country's history to complete a full five-year term – was also exceptional for the activity of female parliamentarians: 20 out of 53 private members' bills during the government's tenure were moved by women, and women outperformed their male counterparts in terms of formal interventions during parliamentary proceedings (FAFEN, 2012). But this greater participation is not reflected in the number of women contesting seats on political party tickets in the upcoming general elections scheduled for May 11th 2013. Despite indicators that a growing number of women are entering politics and registering to vote, Pakistan's political parties have done little in this election cycle to facilitate female participation in the political process.

Pakistan's national and provincial assemblies have reserved seats for women and candidates are appointed to these on the basis of their party's electoral strength. The quota for reserved women's seats was increased to 17% by former president Pervez Musharraf in 2002 in a bid to improve female representation. However, these reserved seats have since been criticised for perpetuating tokenism, especially since most women nominated to the seats hail from politically well-established and influential families. For example, in the 2013 elections the Punjab-based

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) has nominated the party chairman's niece and the wife and daughter of PMLN senator Chaudhry Jafar Iqbal for reserved women's seats in the National Assembly.

In this context gains in female participation in Pakistan's political process are better gauged by the number of women contesting general seats, i.e. openly contested and directly elected seats that are not reserved for women or religious minorities. This year, 108 women are contesting the 272 general National Assembly seats, up from 76 in the 2008 elections. But only 36 of these are party-ticket holders – a minimal increase from 34 in the 2008 elections – with the remainder standing as independents.

The number of female ticket holders for the Pakistan People's Party, which led the previous coalition government, has dropped from 15 in 2008 to 11 out of 219 in 2013; the number of women contesting general National Assembly seats for the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam has also fallen from eight to four out of a total of 41. The Karachi-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement has fielded seven female candidates (up from five in 2008) out of a total of 81, as has the PMLN (up from six) out of a total of 219. The Awami National Party and Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf

have awarded party tickets to two and five female candidates out of totals of 45 and 241, respectively, for general National Assembly seats.

The low confidence expressed in female candidates by political parties contrasts with Pakistani women's growing interest in political participation. Not only has the number of independent female candidates for general National Assembly seats increased, but the profiles of female candidates are also more diverse. For example, 53-year-old Badam Zari, a housewife from Bajaur Agency, has made history by becoming the first female candidate from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas to run for office. Similarly, Nusrat Begum is contesting a seat in Lower Dir, one of Pakistan's most conservative districts, which is dominated by religious extremist groups. In Sindh, 32-year-old Hajiano Lanjo is contesting a seat against well-established politicians in Tharparkar district, while Veero Kolhi, a former landless bonded labourer, is running as an independent in Hyderabad. These women, as well as other independent female candidates, explain that they are contesting elections to address issues that male candidates neglect, including education, health care and women's rights. Their electoral ambitions signal the growing perception that women can participate in the country's political processes.

These contradictory trends can partly be explained by considering the local government system in Pakistan for the past decade. President Musharraf introduced the Local Government Ordinance (LGO) (2001), which established local government at the district, subdistrict and union council levels, with a 33% quota of women's seats for elections at the union council level. This system encouraged female political participation at the grass-roots level, and many women with no previous political experience contested local elections and succeeded in representing their communities.

However, the LGO barred political parties from participating in local government elections, requiring all candidates to contest as independents. As a result, although women entered politics, they do not have ties to political parties and cannot thrive in the party-dominated political landscape. Political parties, meanwhile, do not have a significant base of female party workers who can be cultivated for provincial and federal seats, and have yet to perceive women as key participants with the ability to mobilise voters.

It also remains to be seen whether female voter turnout will be significant enough to influence electoral outcomes, specifically in terms of the electability of female candidates. In the 2008 elections only six out of the 34 women contesting general National Assembly seats on party tickets were successful – a low number that has left political parties cautious about backing female candidates. Since gender-segregated statistics for voter turnout in the 2008 elections are unavailable, parties have not been able

to plan campaigns around female voting patterns. However, it is known that not a single vote was cast at 564 out of the 29,000 polling stations designated for women in 2008. Polling officials estimated that turnout of registered female voters was as low as 10% in socially conservative areas (AFP, 2013).

Female voter turnout in 2013 is also expected to be low. The electoral rolls for the upcoming elections include 48.6 million male and 37.6 million female registered voters. Given the roughly equal gender divide in Pakistan's population, this means approximately 10 million female voters have not been registered. This is probably because fewer women are registered for computerised national identity cards, a prerequisite for voter registration, owing to higher levels of illiteracy and unemployment, prohibitions by male household members, and fewer incentives for registration (such as the need to claim property or travel domestically). Moreover, in the country's conservative north-western districts male family members have prevented women from registering owing to cultural taboos or religious injunctions.

Women are also expected to be particularly affected by the ban issued by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) on political parties arranging transport for voters to reach polling booths (while the move seeks to make the electoral process fairer, it will further restrict the mobility of female voters). Most importantly, women are likely to stay away from polling booths or be instructed by family members and community leaders to do so for fear of attacks by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant group. The TTP has carried out numerous attacks against political party offices in the run-up to the elections and has threatened to attack polling stations on election day; as a result, the ECP has declared 46% of Pakistan's 69,876 polling stations to be "sensitive".

Despite these circumstances, the elections could mark a turning point for female participation as the relatively independent ECP has prioritised improving women's enfranchisement. The ECP has warned against bans on women voting and is establishing more women's polling stations across the country. This is also the first time that the ECP will segregate voter turnout statistics along gender lines in order to give a clearer picture of women's future electoral participation. And weeks before the elections, the Pakistan Ulema (Clerical) Council decreed that voting is a religious responsibility for men and women alike (however, the council stressed the need for separate polling stations for women).

A revival of local government bodies is also anticipated after the general elections. Musharraf's LGO lapsed on December 31st 2009 and in recent years administrators appointed by provincial governments have been governing at the local level with significantly reduced female representation. Under the 18th amendment to the constitution, which passed in 2010, provincial assemblies are responsi-

ble for devolving power to local government. Owing to internal political differences, provinces have taken a long time to settle on local government systems and have deferred local elections until after the general elections.

There is, however, a continuing commitment to maintaining female representation at local levels. For example, the draft of the Punjab Local Government Act (2012) calls for 33% of seats to be reserved for women, while the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Local Government Act (2012) calls for two seats out of 11 for women at the elected union council level as well as 10% per cent of seats to be reserved for women at all other levels.

Local government elections under the next government will continue to develop female participation in the political process. But to establish a lasting role for women at the provincial and federal levels, political parties must not be excluded from local government. The 2013 elections should also be seen as an opportunity for parties to understand the evolving role of women in Pakistani politics.

References

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