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ELECTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN: WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR WOMEN

By Sara Van Wie

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INTRODUCTION

With Afghanistan's presidential and provincial elections just one month away, hopes for free and fair elections depend heavily on the full inclusion of women in the ongoing political process. Afghanistan's future may rest on the peaceful transition of political power, but the April 5th elections will also prove a critical test of the nation's commitment to preserve the more recently secured rights and freedoms of Afghan women, rights some fear are already being eroded and rolled back.

While preparations to secure polling stations are underway, threats against Afghan women at the polls have gone unchecked. Time is running short to make significant progress in the securing of polling stations, which could dramatically limit the opportunity for females to vote. Media, civil society, and non-governmental groups are working to counter challenges by engaging women to boost voter turnout, but concerns mount that a shortage of female security staff at the polling stations could limit participation by women.

In this historic election that will mark the first peaceful transfer from one democratically-elected Afghan government to another, serious threats loom for Afghan women whose names appear on the ballot. Women running for office continue to face attacks, kidnappings, and death threats against themselves and their families. With the stakes high, the Afghan Women's Project is urging the Afghan government and its international partners to ensure the voices of Afghan women will be heard. To achieve a successful outcome in the 2014 elections, the participation and protection of Afghan women at the polls and on the ballot must remain a top priority.

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Recent U.S. policy and media discussions relating to Afghanistan have focused almost exclusively on the military drawdown of NATO-led troops and the transfer of responsibility of Afghan national security to the Afghan National Army and Police. These conversations, while important, overshadow the fact that Afghanistan faces a critical political transition this year: on April 5, 2014, Afghan citizens will go to the polls to cast their vote for a new president.

Historically, transfers of power in Afghanistan have been highly contested and have descended into years of violent conflict. Since 2001, two presidential elections have been held, but no transfer of power from one president to another has occurred. The Afghan Constitution, which instates a two-term limit, bars Afghanistan's current president Hamid Karzai from seeking re-election. This year's elections, which will take place amidst decreasing levels of international aid and a significant, if not complete, drawdown of international troops, will provide a critical test of Afghanistan's nascent democracy. Hanging in the balance are the rights and freedoms of Afghan women, which could be lost if the country descends once again into conflict or newly elected officials fail to recognize women's constitutional rights.

ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK FOR 2014

Transparent, free and fair elections are central to the health of every democracy. In Afghanistan, government, civil society and non-governmental organizations are hard at work in the few months remaining before the 2014 elections: their aim is to ensure that Afghans understand and participate in the electoral process, and that the election is considered fair, representative and legitimate. A successful outcome in 2014 requires that the process includes the voice of Afghan women and avoids widespread electoral fraud. A failed process could incite violent response from anti-governmental groups or tribal factions, and result in an accelerated withdrawal of foreign security and development support crucial to Afghanistan's stability and growth.

According to a recent statement,¹ the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported that Afghan government preparations for the 2014 polls have exceeded those of previous elections. Afghan authorities have approved a legal framework, appointed election commissioners under a new consultative process, and have completed security assessments. These steps, crucial to credible, inclusive and transparent elections, will be followed by the formation of the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC), which will receive and resolve complaints from voters and candidates in the lead up to and the day of the election.²

Candidates interested in running for office in 2014 submitted formal declarations to the IECC in October. Twenty six applicants, including one female, were registered; but only 10 satisfied the necessary eligibility requirements. Those not verified are currently able to challenge the IECC decision before official ballots are announced in November.

Voter registration, led by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), opened in late May 2013. Fazel Ahmad Manawi, head of the IEC, reported that 41 centers across Afghanistan's 36 provinces will target Afghans who are older than 18 years of age.³ In July, the second phase expanded the program's reach to 400 centers in districts and villages. The IEC anticipates an additional four million new voters to be added to the existing 16 million.

GETTING WOMEN TO THE POLLS

While significant milestones have been met in preparation for the 2014 elections, time is running very short for the massive administrative and security efforts necessary to ensure safe and inclusive participation for Afghan men and women at the polls in April. Returning religious conservatism in parts of Afghanistan and increasing violence against women deter them from exercising their basic rights. In the first six months of 2013, civilian deaths rose by 23 percent over the same period in 2012, and deaths of women and children increased by 38 percent.⁴ Religious edicts that restrict women's basic

¹ "UN Special Representative Kubis welcomes progress in 2014 poll preparations" 27 August 2013, viewed at <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=12254&ctl=Details&mid=15756&ItemID=37201&language=en-US>

² While President Karzai has approved the legal structure for the elections, which authorized the creation of independent election and complaints commissions, the process for commission selection has so far excluded civil society representatives as mandated by law.² Ahmad Nader Nadery, director of the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan, an independent watchdog group, told *The New York Times* that proper implementation of the recent election laws would be a major challenge in the coming months. President Karzai vetoed the first draft law, which required inclusion of two international members on the 5-person committee; but, with rising international pressure and future foreign aid made contingent on his legal approval

³ "Afghanistan <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-voter-registration/24997848.html>

⁴ "Afghan conflict takes increasing toll on civilians in first half of 2013 – UN report," UN News Center, 31 July 2013 <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45536#.UioE7WRgYe8>

freedoms and threaten jihad on authorities who attempt to block them have gone unchecked by President Karzai's religious advisors in Kabul.⁵

IEC teams working on voter registration are limited by insecurity and threats by anti-government groups, including the Taliban. "We will only go follow the police force and go where they take us," the IEC head told reporters in May.⁶ This means that Afghans who live in provinces and districts that are not in government control will not be registered or have opportunity to vote.

Voter registration of women in conservative provinces remains low, even when education and outreach programs are available. "We have been visiting homes and trying to [gather] women to explain why voting is important, that they have a voice and, despite government corruption, their vote does matter. We have been working for months and only have eight women registered at the moment," reports Neda Khalihani, a member of the provincial council of Baghlan.⁷

Media and civil society groups seek to engage women and men on a local level to increase their likelihood of participation in 2014. America Abroad Media's Afghan Media Productions (AMP) launched a new radio drama *Baa Hum* (Together)⁸ in partnership with Radio Khurshid. The fictional, 26-episode series will feature prominent female characters who discuss their experiences living as women in Afghanistan and the impact of the 2014 elections on their future. AMP expects the series, which will be broadcast in both Dari and Pashto languages, to provide vital information about the elections and positive role modeling to women in rural areas where female voter turnout has historically been very low.

Other non-governmental organizations seek to eliminate administrative barriers that could drastically impact women's participation. In the 2009 presidential elections, female staff were present at only 30 percent of female polling stations, resulting in the closure of many polling stations or non-participation of women who were not permitted to vote in male-run centers. The outlook for 2014 does not appear much better: of the 12,000 female security staff needed to run female polling stations, only 2,000 have enlisted.⁹ In 2009, shortfalls of female polling staff restricted women's voices and left room for significant voter fraud, including ballot stuffing and proxy voting.

⁵ A muslim cleric in Baghlan issued a decree in June barring women from leaving home without a male relative and shutting down beauty shops on the pretext that they were being used for prostitution. "Taliban-style edict for women spreads alarm in Afghan district," *Reuters*,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/20/us-afghanistan-edict-idUSBRE96J02220130720>

⁶ <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-voter-registration/24997848.html>

⁷ Jessica Donati and Miriam Arghandiwal, "Afghan women may be denied vote because of female security force shortage" *Reuters* viewed at <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/08/28/20231106-afghan-women-may-be-denied-vote-because-of-female-security-force-shortage?lite>

⁸ <http://www.americaabroadmedia.org/programs/international/afghan-media-productions>

⁹ Reuters article (same as above) - <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/08/28/20231106-afghan-women-may-be-denied-vote-because-of-female-security-force-shortage?lite>

With a few months before the elections, civil society and government groups will have to make significant progress to ensure full and free participation of women in 2014. If women cannot access voter registration staff or, (together with their fathers, husbands and brothers) do not feel confident of their safety in traveling to the polls, they will not be able to participate in this critical moment in Afghanistan's democracy.

WOMEN RUNNING FOR OFFICE

When it comes to inclusion of women on official ballots in Afghanistan, female politicians face almost insurmountable odds. Marginalization of women within the political process as well as blatant, purposeful attacks on their lives and families discourage women from entering or continuing in political life. However, despite the challenges, female civil servants and civil society groups continue to advocate and promote women's representation in 2014 and beyond.

Political coalitions in Afghanistan are pushing political parties to move beyond "symbolic" inclusion of women in the political process in the 2014 elections. National quotas for female representation in parliament and district councils have been vital to open the door to women in Afghanistan's political system, but have often been used as a tool by political parties to gain international support. Organizations like the women's Political Partnership Committee, the National Front, and the Right and Justice Party publically advocate for women to have equal opportunity within political parties and grant women access to more senior level positions. This encouraging development within Afghan civil society demonstrates internal pressure to increase the quality and quantity of women's participation on the ballots of 2014 and 2015.¹⁰

International organizations seek to support Afghan civil society engaged in women's political participation. In April 2013, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) gathered 200 women parliamentarians, political party officials, provincial council members and young leaders from Afghanistan's 34 provinces to discuss how Afghans could work across gender and party lines to overcome political obstacles facing female politicians. Participants developed strategies for engaging women in politics on a local, regional and national level, and learned how to run effective political campaigns. Training sessions on Afghan political processes and policy issues gave confidence to female participants to engage their male counterparts and constituents on important issues. Civic groups established/implemented strategies to reach out to religious leaders to discuss and promote women's participation in the political process and the expansion of basic rights on a local level.¹¹

¹⁰ Women's Rights Should not be used as a political tool: CPPW" *Tolo News Online*, 12 August 2013, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/11527-womens-rights-should-not-be-used-as-a-political-tool-cppw>

¹¹ "In Afghanistan, working across party, gender lines to help women overcome political obstacles," National Democratic Institute, <http://www.ndi.org/women-in-politics-afghanistan>

However, despite civil society and international support for women in politics, the reality remains that Afghan women who enter the political sphere often do so at tremendous risk to themselves and their families. Sima Samar, head of the Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan, claims that Taliban tactics have specifically targeted women in high ranks of government. By targeting high profile women, Samar claims, the Taliban seeks to “limit the active presence and activities of women in their society.”¹²

Between July and December of 2012, two consecutive chiefs of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in Laghman province were assassinated.¹³ In August 2013, female parliamentarian Fariba Ahmadi Kakar from Kandahar province was kidnapped by Taliban militants.¹⁴ That same week, female senator Roh Guhl Khairzad’s vehicle was ambushed in Gazhni as she drove with her husband and daughter to celebrate the Eid festival marking the end of Ramadan. Khairzad’s eight-year old daughter and the driver were killed in the attack and she and her husband survived. “Unfortunately, the enemies of Afghanistan do not want women to join politics,” Khairzad told the BBC. “They attack women and kill them to scare other women and discourage them from coming into politics.”

Despite threats and growing insecurity, Afghan women bravely refuse to let their voices be silenced or to forsake the gains of the past 12 years. Roh Buhl Khairzad plans to return to office after her gunshot wounds heal. Shah Bibi Saeedi has volunteered to fill the vacancy left by her two assassinated predecessors in Laghman. Countless unnamed activists who receive daily death threats continue their important work to ensure that women have a voice in 2014 and, in turn, that Afghanistan has a hope for a democratic future.

The stakes are high for Afghanistan during this tenuous time of transition – especially for Afghan women. The government of Afghanistan, together with the United States and other international partners, must redouble their commitment and support of the women of Afghanistan. Negotiations relating to military operations must not overshadow the fact that the security of Afghan citizens will not likely exist without a successful political transition in 2014. Critical to that transition is the participation of one-half of the country’s population – Afghan women.

¹² “Taliban using new techniques to limit the presence of women: Sima Samar” *Ariana News*, 17 August 2013, <http://ariananews.af/regional/taliban-using-new-techniques-to-limit-the-presence-of-women-sima-samar/>

¹³ “Women’s voices Urgently Needed for Country’s Transition, Activists Say,” *United States Institute of Peace*, <http://www.usip.org/olivebranch/afghan-women-s-voices-urgently-needed-country-s-transition-activists-say>

¹⁴ “Female Afghan MP kidnapped,” *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/15/female-afghan-mp-kidnapped>