



Afghanistan's women achieve stunning result in national elections

■ M. Ashraf Haidari

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In the two decades before the fall of the Taliban in 2001, continuous civil strife in Afghanistan deprived Afghan women of the opportunity to participate in the political life of the country. The lack of social and economic freedoms left them marginalized and vulnerable, a financial burden on an impoverished society. Together with children and the elderly, they became victims of unspeakable atrocities. And during the Taliban period any glimmer of hope for emancipation and empowerment of Afghan women was snuffed out, as they were denied their basic human rights to education, healthcare, employment and movement outside their homes.

However, the long agony of Afghanistan's women suddenly ended with the fall of the Taliban and the re-engagement of the international community in Afghanistan, as a result of the US-led response to the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Less than two months after the defeat of the Taliban in December 2001, the Bonn Agreement set the stage for establishment of democracy in our country. With democracy came the freedom of women, who began playing an active role in the rebuilding of Afghanistan's society, polity and economy.

Indeed, in the four years since the Bonn Agreement was signed, women have been the most engaged and dynamic force in Afghanistan's political process. The last objective of the Bonn Agreement was technically achieved on September 18, 2005, through the holding of national elections. On that day, the women of Afghanistan contin-

ued to make history as they turned out in unexpectedly large numbers to elect members of parliament and 34 provincial councils, in the first such poll in almost 30 years. Women voters accounted for 43 percent of voters, in defiance of many terrorist threats from the Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgents.

At the same time, more than 600 women candidates competed for the 68 (out of a total of 249) parliamentary seats guaranteed for women under the Afghan constitution. However, preliminary poll results indicate that women would have won about 27 percent of the seats even without the constitutional quota. Women did well on ballots in most locales, including Kabul where Shukria Barezai, editor of Women Mirror weekly magazine, finished 24th out of the 33 candidates that got elected. She recently told the Financial Times: "This is great news for Afghanistan. Next time women will do even better."

Fauzia Gailani got 17,000 votes in Herat, and Malai Joya got 8,000 votes in Farah. With Shukria of Kabul, these women became the icons of this landmark parliamentary election. In the pre-election period, they campaigned hard, presenting their agendas outspokenly, promising to speak up for the rights of their constituents, women and men, if elected. They demonstrated that, given the chance, the women of Afghanistan can and will be full players in the reconstruction process of our country.

In late December, the first session of the parliament will convene with a higher percentage of women representatives, 27.3 percent, than many of the most established democracies, including the US Congress (15.2 percent) and British Parliament (19.7

percent). The 27.3 percent places Afghanistan among the top 25 democratic countries with a high degree of women's representation in the key governmental bodies.

In addition, an increasing number of women have returned to the workplace as members of the cabinet, governors, ambassadors, physicians, businesswomen, lawyers, army officers and teachers. In these roles, they hold numerous leadership positions in the private, public and civil society sectors of Afghanistan. This has happened as a direct result of the government's commitment to ensuring gender equality and protection of women's rights under the constitution.

Last December, President Karzai appointed three women ministers to the cabinet, including two-time former presidential candidate and women's rights activist Massouda Jalal as the Minister of Women's Affairs. Minister Jalal has now become the voice of every girl and woman in Afghanistan, making sure that the government's gender-sensitive policies are fully implemented to safeguard the rights of women under the constitution. In the meantime, Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is spearheading the government's efforts through its 55 diplomatic missions abroad to harness the goodwill and support of the international community for the women of Afghanistan.

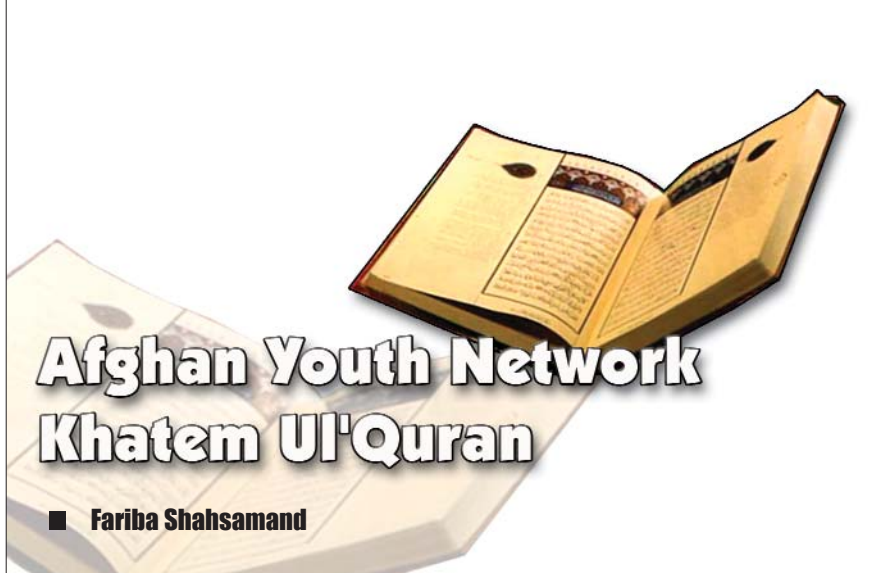
Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah co-chairs the US-Afghan Women Council. In January 2002, President Karzai and President Bush founded the Council to promote public-private partnerships between US and Afghan institutions and mobilize private sector resources to help Afghan

women. Empowering women to participate and take leadership roles in the political and economic life of their country, the Council focuses on four areas: political leadership and legal awareness, economic empowerment, education, and health. The Council in collaboration with the Ministry of Women's Affairs has established Women's Resource Centers in 34 provinces to provide Afghan women with services in the above areas.

Only four years after the overthrow of the Taliban, these laudable achievements point to an important fact: the international re-engagement in Afghanistan has been paying off in a major way, particularly in the establishment of real democracy and the securing of human and civil rights for our women. However, to keep up the momentum requires consolidation of Afghanistan's new democracy through long-term investment in the socio-economic development of the country.

Afghanistan still has some of the world's lowest social and economic indicators, ranking 173 out of 178 nations on the UN's 2004 Human Development Index. Women and children, who constitute two thirds of the Afghan population, and are the key to Afghanistan's long-term development, are the main victims of the past 25 years of war and destruction. It is only through sustainable investment in the human development of this large segment of the population that the future of Afghanistan can truly be secured.

Afghanistan has only traveled three miles of its 10-mile democratic peace-building process. While the three-mile distance has been covered well, the seven miles remaining promise to be long and arduous. To walk this uphill seven miles, Afghanistan needs the continued moral and material support of the United States and the international community. Nonetheless, the reward at the end of the 10 miles will be - among other things - the ability of women to 'do even better' in Afghanistan's future democratic elections.



Afghan Youth Network Khatem UI'Quran

■ Fariba Shahsamand

What better way than to launch Afghan Youth Network's event with a Khatem UI'Quran. In this holy month of Rhamadan, a truly special month and time to learn about ourselves, to remember the spirit of giving, to pray for betterment, social justice, good health and UNITY. Afghan Youth Network couldn't have selected a better time than a more peaceful time of Rhamadan.

Saturday October 15, 2005, Afghan Youth Network was launched with a Khatem UI'Quran at the Islamic Community of Afghans in Canada (Jami Islami) in the Youth Section room. AYN members, families, other individuals, groups, and participants all volunteered to read chapters from the Holy Quran, to bring food from borani bonjaan to gelabi to qabuli, to spend time remembering our fellow global brothers and sisters who are less fortunate and who have been affected by the deadly earthquake, and to appreciate every moment of our life that has been blessed by Allah's (SWT) support and P r o p h e t M u h a m m a d ' s (PBUH) guidance.

Here are what some had to say about AYN Khatem and Rhamadan:

"It was a religious and cultural, yet a joyful event, just like a family type gathering."

Ghani Homa

"By holding this Khatem you did more than pray for others, you provided your mind with a much needed rejuvenation. In the long run it will benefit you as much as those you prayed for."

Hangama Ahmadzai

"I want to take my turn and congratulate each and everyone of you for putting up such a great effort in the way of getting closer to the Creator of ALL that is visible and invisible."

Ahmad Wais Popalyar

AYN organizers prepared an event that was meaningful to everyone in one way or another. Whether it was through individual prayers, reading the Quran, listening to the Youth Section Tahwashee Group, participating in the discussion, or enjoying a meal in a united atmosphere everyone was impacted by the nature of the event. For some, it was a unique experience connecting to our spiritual side and for others it was an opportunity to take part in positive efforts for the Afghan community. With varied reasons, it was a time and place for the Afghan community to come together as one, to network as a starting point and work as team towards issues that effect us in different ways.

Congratulations Afghan Youth Network for a successful event and commencing positive work in the Afghan community and in the larger North American society.

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