

The Role and Participation of Women as Voters in Afghan Elections

KHOJASTA SAMEYEE¹

After the Taliban regime was toppled in 2001 and the new government was set up in Afghanistan with the support of the international community, women's rights and their political participation became an important issue in the country. Afghanistan's constitution contains the general legal framework as well specific provisions for women's participation in elections both as voters and candidates. Based on these legal provisions, women have participated in the past five elections in the country both as voters and as candidates. This essay provides an overview of women's participation as voters in the 2004, 2009 and 2014 presidential elections and the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections. This essay also analyzes the factors that hinder women's participation as voters in the elections.

LEGAL PROVISIONS FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS AS VOTERS

The Afghanistan's 2004 constitution contains provisions for women's participation in the presidential, parliamentary, provincial council and municipal elections. Article 33 of the constitution prescribes that all citizens of Afghanistan are entitled the right to vote and to be voted for.² This right has also been stipulated in the election laws that have governed elections in Afghanistan in the post-2001 years. These rights have been supported by the 2005 electoral law as well.

¹ . Khojasta Sameyee is an International Relations Officer at Radio Azad in Afghanistan.

² . The Constitution of Afghanistan (2004).
http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/afg/images/pliki/The_Constitution.pdf

Article 3 of this law stated that all voters participate in the elections based on the principle of equal rights. Article 5 of the same law stipulated that “Voters and candidates participate in elections on their free will. Placing any restrictions on candidates and voters, be it direct or indirect, on the basis of language, religion, ethnicity, gender, place of residence, and social prestige is prohibited.”³ This law governed the 2005, 2009, and 2010 elections. In 2013, a new election law was passed which too upheld the rights of all citizens to vote and be voted for. Article 5(1) of the 2013 election law stipulated that “Every citizen eligible to vote, both men and women, have the right to register as a voter or candidate and participate in elections.”⁴ Article 5(4) prohibits any restrictions on voters: “Eligible voters are entitled to equal rights in the elections and they can use this right directly. Placing any direct or indirect restrictions on voters on the basis of language, religion, ethnicity, sex, clan, region, residency and social or occupational status or disability is prohibited.”⁴ This law governed the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan.

In 2016, a new Election Law was passed.⁵ Article 5(1) of the 2016 Election Law clearly states that “Every citizen eligible to vote, both men and women, have the right to register as a voter or candidate and participate in elections.”⁶ Article 5(4) outlaws any restrictions against eligible citizens who participate in the elections: “The eligible voters have equal right of vote in elections which they use directly. Imposing any kind of direct or indirect restrictions on voters and candidates on the basis of language, religion, ethnicity, sex,

³ . The Constitution of Afghanistan (2004). http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/afg/images/pliki/The_Constitution.pdf 4. Ibid.

⁴ . Ibid.

⁵ . Official Gazette Election Law (Islamic Republic Of Afghanistan Ministry Of Justice). [Http://Moj.Gov.Af/Content/Files/Officialgazette/01201/Og_01226_English.Pdf](http://Moj.Gov.Af/Content/Files/Officialgazette/01201/Og_01226_English.Pdf)

⁶ . Ibid

clan, region, residency and social or occupational status or disability is prohibited.”⁷

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION AS VOTERS IN POST-2001 ELECTIONS

THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Afghanistan held its first presidential election on 19 October 2004.⁸ Approximately 8 million people voted, of which women comprised approximately 40%.⁹ This was a promising percentage given that awareness among the people, particularly among women, was low regarding the election, its significance, and the role of the people in the process. A favorable security situation across the country, and an emerging hope for a better future, were the main reasons for this high level of participation.

THE 2005 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

In September 2005, Afghanistan held its first parliamentary election in the post-Taliban era. The voter turnout in this election was approximately 6 million, of which women comprised 41%.¹⁰ Although the overall participation of people as voters was lower compared to the previous election, the percentage of participation of women as voters did not change much. This was possible due to low electoral fraud and a favorable security situation, and women were able to cast their votes without any fear. In fact, women’s

⁷ . Ibid

⁸ . Gall, Carlotta. “Election of Karzai Is Declared Official.” The New York Times. November 04, 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/04/world/asia/election-of-karzai-is-declared-official.html>.

⁹ . Smith, Scott Seward. “The 2004 Presidential Elections in Afghanistan.”

https://www.afghanistananalysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/09/3_Smith_The_2004_Presidential_Elections.pdf.

¹⁰ . Document titled “Quick glance at women’s participation in previous elections,” retrieved from Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) on July 2018. (original in Dari).

participation would have been even higher if female employees had been hired for the election process.¹¹

THE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The second presidential and provincial council election was held in 2009. This election was not a satisfactory one for the people of Afghanistan because the security situation across the country had become challenging. Armed opposition groups were active and posed threats to the government and the election process, causing people to feel apprehensive regarding participating in the election.¹² As a result, the general turnout was low, clocking 4.6 million votes—which only represented 31% of the country’s total population eligible to vote.¹³ Moreover, women’s participation as voters decreased from 41% in the previous elections to 38.7% percent in the 2009 election, and given the dip in the overall numbers, women’s participation in this election was considerably lower than during the previous polls.¹⁴

THE 2010 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

The next parliamentary election in Afghanistan was held in 2010. Women’s participation as voters was 40% in this election.¹⁵ This was slightly higher compared to the 2009 presidential election (38.7%). The security situation was tense during the election, affecting the overall turnout. As a

¹¹ . “Women in Elections in Afghanistan Challenges and Opportunities for Future Civic Participation.” Women’s Perspective Series, October 2014. <http://www.epd-afg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WE-paper-English.pdf>.

¹² . Ibid.

¹³ . “Barriers to Greater Participation by Women in Afghan Elections.” Office Of The Special Inspector General For Afghanistan Reconstruction, October 28, 2009. <https://www.Sigar.Mil/Pdf/Audits/2009-10-28audit-10-01.Pdf>.

¹⁴ . “The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections in Afghanistan.” National Democratic Institute. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Elections_in_Afghanistan_2009.pdf.

¹⁵ . Worden, Scott, and Nina Sudhakar. “Learning from Women’s Success in the 2010 Afghan Elections.” United States Institute of Peace,, June 2012, 7. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/06/learning-womens-success-2010-afghan-elections>.

result, the turnout was 1 million voters less the 2009 elections.¹⁶ According to the Independent Election Commission's (IEC) September 2010 report, a total of 938 polling centers in 25 provinces remained closed on election day due to security concerns.¹⁷

THE 2014 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The third presidential election was held in 2014 amidst a dire security situation and political polarization in the country. Women's participation in the run-off of the 2014 election was registered at 38%.¹⁸ A report by the Free and Fair Election Forum Afghanistan (FEFA) blames security, ~~political,~~ ~~econo~~mic, social factors, economical dependency, illiteracy, dual approaches with women, threatening of female candidates by male candidates, lack of awareness among women on the political process, inadmissible traditions and negative publicity against women as factors that negatively impacted women's participation during the 2014 presidential elections.²⁰

Women's participation as voters in all 5 elections in Afghanistan is summarized in the table below:

¹⁶ . Nordland, Elisabeth Bumiller And Rod. "Afghan Vote Marked by Light Turnout and Violence." The New York Times. September 18, 2010.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/world/asia/19afghan.html>.

¹⁷ . Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. "Finalization of Polling Center List for 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections 5 Sept 2010." Information and External Relations Department, Independent Election Commission. News release. http://www.iec.org.af/pdf/wolesi-pressr/pressr_on_no_changes_pc_list.pdf.

¹⁸ . Athayi, Abdullah. "Shaping the Future - Women's Participation in the 2014 Elections." Heinrich Böll Foundation. Accessed October 09, 2018. <https://www.boell.de/en/2014/06/24/shaping-future-womens-participation-2014-elections?dimension1=as#5>.

YEAR	2004	2005	2009	2010	2014
Type of Elections	Presidential	Parliamentary	Presidential	Parliamentary	Presidential
Total number of voters	8,128,940	6408,324	4,823,090	5,602,690	first) 7,018,89 (round 8,109,493 (run-off)
Women's percentage	40%	41%	38.7%	39%	first) 37% (round (run-off) 36%

Source: Multiple sources¹⁹

KEY OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AS VOTERS IN ELECTIONS

Social Challenges

Political participation of women in Afghanistan's society is faced with multiple different challenges, one of which is social obstacles. It is the main challenge preventing Afghanistan's women from achieving increased development. Afghanistan's is a traditional and patriarchal society, and over the course of the four decades of civil wars and insurgencies, people's prejudices against women's presence in the society and their activities have become entrenched. There is a tendency to relegate women's roles to those involving childbirth, child rearing, and other domestic matters. That women have their own rights as a human being both in Islam and under Afghanistan's laws is yet to be fully accepted by the society. Women are often deprived of their basic rights such as education, choice of life partner, inheritance etc. This context must be borne in mind while

¹⁹ . This table was developed by the author and is based on data collected from various sources cited in this paper, and FEFA publications.

attempting to understand women's participation in political life either as candidates or as voters. Given the prevailing social norms, men from most families do not allow the women and girls of their families to be present or partake in social and political processes such as elections, given how elections are manifestation of every eligible citizen asserting their right to make their individual choice to select their leader.

Logistical Challenges

Afghanistan is a fairly big country and is divided to 34 province and 363 districts and a large number of villages. When the polling booths are set up during every election, those who live in far off districts and remote areas find that voting centers located far away from them. As a result, the chances of their participation in the process get diminished; and women and girls in particular are more severely affected because many of them do not participate in the elections due to the combined factors of distance and social norms, and consequently, end up not using their votes. Moreover, most of people in Afghanistan live in poverty and do not have disposable income or logistical facilities to transport them to the voting centers and back. This is another reason why many women who live in remote areas do not participate in the elections.

Security Challenges

Lack of security is a tremendous challenge all around the country, as armed groups expand their activities with each passing day. The armed groups seek the collapse the government of Afghanistan, and threaten people to prevent them from working with the government or participating in any of the governmental process, especially election. The armed groups have killed and injured many voters in during elections. People are afraid of the Taliban and are not

convinced that the government will provide them with security because the government of Afghanistan always fails on its promise to the people that it will ensure their security on Election Day. In addition to this, for women voters, the inadequate numbers of female police and electoral personnel at the voting centers are some of the other reasons preventing them from exercising their right to participate in the electoral process.

Lack of Awareness

Awareness is the key element for the success of any process. Afghanistan is a traditional and religious country where the women's rights are not fully enforced. Moreover, a large number of women and girls are illiterate and the levels of awareness among those from far off districts and remote areas are low. Additionally, the media's reach in remote areas is also low, and collectively, all these add to the lack of awareness among women and girls about elections, and their roles and rights—both as voters and as candidates—with regard to the electoral processes.

CONCLUSION

After the fall of the Taliban regime and advent of a democratic form of government, people in Afghanistan found themselves beginning to live a normal life in a fledgling democracy. Both men and women have welcomed elections and have participated in large numbers. However, women's participation has been lower than that of men's participation. The various factors for this occurrence have been outlined above. The state should address those responsible factors and facilitate and foster a conducive environment to ensure that women and men are able to participate in elections and exercise their rights fully and as equals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Increase awareness among women:** Increasing awareness among women regarding their own rights, particularly on electing their leaders, election processes, benefits of participating in elections, and explaining their roles as human beings must be carried out comprehensively by using different kinds of platforms such as radio, TV, print media, social media etc. In the inner districts and remote areas in particular, where people, especially women and girls, are illiterate, religious leaders and influential persons could be roped in to encourage and facilitate the participation of women and girls in elections.
- **Increase male family members' awareness about women's rights:** Afghanistan is a country where men have a high influence and a lot of say on the lives of women and girls. Moreover, in the rural areas (and often even in urban areas) men are illiterate and are not convinced of the rights of women and girls. Emphasis should therefore be laid on increasing the knowledge and awareness among Afghanistan's men regarding the rights of women and girls as prescribed both in Islam and Afghanistan's laws. The IEC should launch awareness drives