

# Nepal's Historic Vote Puts Women in Running

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**Inside Nepal's sealed borders women are running for historic April 10 Constituent Assembly elections. As they take advantage of ambitious gender quotas they are learning how to vote and doing what they can to weather campaign violence.**

KATMANDU, Nepal (WOMENSENEWS)—Nepal has sealed its borders as it tries to safely forge a new path after 240 years of autocratic monarchical rule, 10 years of a violent Maoist insurgency and two years of a wary stability under an interim government.

Tomorrow the country holds elections to form its first Constituent Assembly.

In addition to governing this tiny Himalayan kingdom, those elected on April 10 will draft a new constitution and hammer out the role of the king, who in 2006 relinquished powers to an interim parliament. Seven major parties and about 50 smaller groups are running candidates.

For women the day is particularly a landmark.

Last year, under the influence of a dominant Maoist faction, the interim parliament's seven-party coalition framed an interim constitution that required parties' candidates to be 33 percent female.

Of these, 50 percent have to be filed in the closed lists, which are selected by voting for parties rather than individuals. The rest are fielded for direct elections.

Those are high numbers for a society where educational gaps offer a glimpse at women's longstanding subordinate role. The male literacy rate is 63 percent, according to statistics from the Nepal Election Commission; for women it's 35 percent.

"I had to wait so many years and travel to India to complete my schooling in the 1940s because there was no school for girls in Nepal then," Sahana Pradhan, the country's interim minister of foreign affairs, told Women's eNews in a recent interview.

## Waiting for Results

While the quotas are high, Sharda Pokharel, a former member of parliament, is cautious about how they'll translate into election results.

Pokharel now heads the Women Security Pressure Group, an umbrella group of women's organizations across Nepal. She suspects parties, simply to fulfill legal requirements, are fielding weak female candidates in direct elections for seats where opponents are sure to win.

Pokharel has been running voter education and awareness programs since November in all parts of the country.

Women's eNews caught up with her recently during the lunch break for a workshop with about a hundred female attendees.

Looking beyond the elections, Pokharel was circulating the list of demands her group wants the next assembly to incorporate into the constitution, including increased political participation by women and a 50-percent quota in parliament. The group also wants a recent law allowing women to inherit property from their parents to be implemented; a constitutional guarantee of equality; compulsory education; and greater security from interpersonal violence, assault, rape and trafficking.

The total number of women seeking direct election is only 367 out of a total of 3,947 candidates.

Nonetheless, many political participants here expect that the high quotas—33 percent overall and 50 percent in the closed list—should mean that women wind up taking more than 20 percent of the places in the assembly.

### **Maoist Legacy**

To the extent women are enjoying new political rights in these elections Sapana Pradhan-Malla, a lawyer and president of a women's advocacy group, concedes it is a legacy of the insurgency by the Maoists, as the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) here is popularly known.

While the Maoists are associated with armed conflict, totalitarian tactics and heavy death tolls, their role in the interim government is associated with pushing for greater political involvement for women, banning the "untouchable" status of some castes in the villages and giving women a stake in parental property.

"They had a more gender-friendly agenda," says Pradhan-Malla, who is running for a seat in Parliament as part of the closed list of the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist, the Maoists' archrival party.

Female candidates are facing the same kind of ferocious intimidation afflicting men.

One woman's house was burned by a party rival and another's car was stoned and her volunteer workers attacked physically, according to recent press reports.

Ranjana Sarkar, running as an invisible member of Nepal's United Marxist Leninist Party, told Women's eNews she had received numerous threats over the phone telling her to withdraw her candidacy.

Sujata Koirala, the daughter of the current prime minister, who is running for direct election, was greeted with black flags when she went to campaign in her southern district. Her car was stoned and her workers physically attacked in violence that local news agencies linked to a rival regional party.

Workers for the Marxist Leninist party told Women's eNews that the house of one of their candidates, Kamala Mahto, was set on fire.

### **Preparing Women to Vote**

Nonetheless, Babita Basnet, the 36-year-old editor of a Nepali weekly and president of a national media monitoring forum of female journalists based in the capital, remains upbeat about the voting-related activity focused on women. Efforts are being organized by political parties and women's groups jointly with international entities such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women,

the U.S. Agency for International Development and Oxfam, a British relief organization.

Basnet also says female candidates are exerting influence, even when they might not win.

As an example she points to Bhimkumari Beuda, an obscure female candidate with the Nepali Congress party who is running in direct elections against the Maoist leader, Prachanda, who is likely to win. Nonetheless Basnet says Beuda is giving her party a lot of help. Her husband and son were killed by Maoist insurgents and the candidate says that reminds voters of why they might want to support an opposing party.

Basnet's monitoring group has been staging street theaters throughout Nepal's high rocky terrain and its southern plains for the past year to teach women how to vote. Women who cannot read are taught how to put their indelible-ink stamp on a ballot and how to identify different party symbols. Women at polling stations on Thursday will also provide guidance to female voters.

To emphasize the importance of women's participation in the elections they have come up with a jingle, "Sambidhan Sabha Laye, Mahila Ko Aka Le Hero," which means "Look at the Constituent Assembly Through Women's Eyes."

The group is also helping to arrange for a substantial police presence at polling stations, including female officers. It plans to station 100 of its members alongside other observer groups at polling stations so that female voters, especially in rural areas, will feel safe.

Other groups that will observe the elections include the Nepal Election Monitoring Association and the Democratic Electoral Alliance of Nepal. International groups include the Carter Center, founded by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and the Bangkok, Thailand-based Asian Network for Free Elections with many female observers participating.

"I have worked with so many women, from the most urban to the most rural and I find that the woes of working women remain the same," Basnet told Women's eNews. "Irrespective of the work they are doing and the money they are earning, they are both questioned by their family if they ever happen to come home late. In both scenarios it is their sexuality that is under the family's scanner."

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## **A Crumbling Kingdom**

Nepal is a small landlocked kingdom sandwiched between China and India. Some semblance of democracy was introduced to Nepal in 1990, denting the totalitarian monarchy's power.

In 1996 an insurgency led by Maoists broke out and fighting claimed thousands of lives. The current king, Gyanendra, came to the throne after his brother, Birendra, and most of the royal family were murdered by the crown prince in 2001. In 2005 King Gyanendra dissolved parliament and restored absolute rule.

His grip on power has been challenged by a nationwide people's movement demanding the reinstatement of parliament. An uneasy peace reigned after the king acquiesced. The government and the Maoists signed an agreement and the Maoists entered parliament in January 2007.

Since then, the fragile peace has prevailed and the king's power has been curtailed. After the

election, the new parliament will draft a national constitution. In December 2007, a seven-party alliance controlling the government signed a 23-point agreement with the Maoists under which Nepal was declared a federal republic, a declaration that is subject to a vote by the new Constituent Assembly at the first meeting after the election. If the declaration is confirmed, the monarchy will be permanently dissolved.

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\* From <http://www.womensenews.org:80/article.cfm?aid=3557>

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\* Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors.womensenews.org](mailto:editors.womensenews.org).