

Afghan election body strives to register female voters

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Stars and Stripes

Published: June 27, 2013

The Independent Election Commission in Afghanistan is in a race against time.

They have a little less than a year to show that they can register a fair representation of Afghan women to vote in next year's elections, a challenge they recognize will be extremely difficult.

Since voter registration centers opened 33 days ago, the latest numbers show that of the 70,000 Afghans have registered to vote in the election to date, 15,000 of those have been women, or about 1 percent above the previous registration cycle, according to a recent report released by the commission, known as the IEC.

The IEC has put several programs targeting women.

"This year we have TV channel campaigns directed solely towards women, so they can know the process. We have other activities too -- our 'Gender Unit' is working closely with related organizations so these campaigns will be effective," said Noor Mohammad Noor, the spokesperson for the Independent Election Commission in Afghanistan.

Much of the campaigns will be on-the-ground type registration, with officials making their way out into the provinces and meeting with the women face-to-face. Seminars, consultations, and local meetings are also part of the plan.

The IEC also is planning to use social programs and informational leaflets to get more Afghan women to take part in the voting process, even though the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organization, has reported literacy rates for Afghan women to be around 12.5 percent.

But women in Afghanistan face more than just literacy boundaries when it comes to informing themselves on political issues and candidates in their country. Social and cultural norms that attempt to limit independent Afghan women, especially in the surrounding rural provinces outside of the capital, are still very much in place.

Just last month, the national parliament failed to ratify the Eliminating Violence Against Women law, which was intended to secure the simplest of rights for women in the country, ranging from criminalizing child marriages, to outlawing the selling and buying of women. The postponement of the bill was cited as a major set back to women's rights in the country.

The election commission is hoping that their "Gender Unit" will be able break through stigmas and succeed in their task to assure that all registration programs are fairly targeting women as much as men.

"We've learned many lessons from the last elections," said Noor. "We've learned that the candidates really want the support of the females this election season, which is important. We also have many more organizations in Afghanistan that are working for the rights of women, so this will also be important in helping them understand the voting process," he said.

The IEC says its has a goal of registering 4 million voters in total by the time the April elections roll around next year.

"In the past election in 2009, we had women participation at around 30 to 40 percent, but this time we have a lot more preparation, starting more than a year out, so we're hoping for more than 40 percent," Noor said.

They also plan to have a high number of national and international observers to make sure the elections aren't marred by corruption.

Security will also play a large role in the amount of voters that turnout to the polls.

It's been more than a week since security for the entire country has been fully transferred to the Afghan National Security Forces, and it's been a week plagued by violent attacks throughout the country, most recently a brazen attack at the Presidential Palace in the country's capital, Kabul.

Suicide attackers set off a car bomb, and engaged in a lengthy gun battle with security forces just outside the palace, in what was known to be one of the most secure areas of the capital.

Security forces were praised by the government for their ability to fend off the attack, but Afghans will be watching the effectiveness of those forces very closely in the run up to the election, to determine whether or not going to the polls next year is even an option for them.

"Of course the concerns for females here is about security. This is one of their biggest issues, but we are working closely with the Afghan National Security Forces," Noor said.

"Last elections, we only gave them a few weeks advance for some of the polling stations, but this time we have already given them a list of a majority of the polling stations, so they can plan in advance for security."

The IEC says registration centers throughout all the provinces will be open until two weeks before the elections, which are set for April 5, 2014.

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