

Pakistani woman makes history with run in May vote

BY ANWARULLAH KHAN | The Associated Press April 1, 2013 9:28AM

KHAR, Pakistan — A 40-year-old Pakistani housewife has made history by becoming the first woman to run for parliament from the country's northwest tribal region, a highly conservative area that is a haven for Islamist militants.

Badam Zari told The Associated Press on Monday that she will participate in the election May 11 to bring greater attention to problems facing women, which she believes the government has ignored.

"I want to reach the assembly to become a voice for women, especially those living in the tribal areas," Zari said.

Zari is from Bajur, part of Pakistan's semiautonomous tribal region bordering Afghanistan. The area is mostly populated by Pashtun tribesmen who have very conservative views toward women. Most women in the tribal region are uneducated, rarely work outside the home and wear long, flowing clothes that cover most of their skin when they appear in public.

Zari spoke to reporters at a press conference Monday wearing a colorful shawl wrapped around her body and head, with only her eyes showing.

Bajur is one of the many areas in the tribal region where the army has battled Taliban militants, who are waging a bloody insurgency against the government. The militants have a history of using violence to enforce their hard-line views on women.

Last fall, the Taliban in a different part of the northwest shot 15-year-old schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai in the head in an unsuccessful attempt to kill her because she resisted the militants' views and was a strong advocate of girls' education.

Zari, who finished high school and does not have any children, said she filed the paperwork necessary to run for office on Sunday in Khar, the main town in Bajur. She was accompanied by her husband, who she said fully backed her decision to run for a seat in the National Assembly.

"This was a difficult decision, but now I am determined and hopeful society will support me," Zari said.

Men in Bajur and other parts of the tribal region have historically discouraged women to vote, saying they should remain at home, according to local traditions.

Far fewer women vote than men in other parts of Pakistan as well, and females remain underrepresented in the country's politics. But there are examples of Pakistani women holding very powerful political positions in the country, such as the late former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

Zari said she hopes she can convince women to go out to vote. Out of the roughly 186,000 registered voters in her constituency, about 67,000 are women, according to government records.

Under Pakistan's political system, the winning candidate is the one who receives the most votes — not necessarily a majority — meaning Zari could be a strong candidate if she can get women to vote for her.

Zari said she has not yet received any threats or been discouraged from locals to run.

"My decision to contest the election will not only give courage to women in general and attract attention to their problems, but also helps negate the wrong impression about our society," Zari said. "This will reflect a true picture of our society, where women get respect."

Copyright 2013 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.
