

Focus on: Pakistan

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE FROM A GENDER LENS

A series of write up from experts in the field reflecting on the role of women in last elections.

— 2024
— 2009
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About the Author

REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION SUPER CYCLE NADEEM

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Women's Political Representation in Pakistan – A Historical Overview

Gender mainstreaming in state institutions is essential for promoting gender equality in society. One effective approach to achieving this goal is through political and cultural advocacy focused on gender issues. Despite the long history of the women's movement in Pakistan, women still lack significant representation in both national and provincial assemblies. The few women who manage to secure seats in these assemblies often come from upper-class backgrounds and have inherited their positions through family connections. Additionally, women's issues are rarely prioritised on their agendas. In 2000, Pakistan implemented a policy ensuring 33 percent representation for women in local governments.

One major reason for women's exclusion from state institutions and politics in Pakistan is the country's identity as a Muslim state. This identity was shaped by the military's adherence to the Two Nation Theory, which aimed to differentiate Pakistan from India (Jalal, 1991). According to this perspective, interpretations of Islam emphasised women's roles primarily within the household. Consequently, women's participation in public life was often seen as contrary to the identity of Muslims in Pakistan (ibid: 1991).

The situation illustrates that successive governments in Pakistan have done little to enhance women's political participation. Following Pakistan's independence, the initial government was relatively liberal (Shaheed, Zia, and Warraich, 1998). It implemented several measures, including universal suffrage, equal rights to education and employment, and reserved seats for women in national and provincial legislatures (ibid: 1998).

While comprehensive historical data on constitutional provisions for women's representation in Pakistan is limited, Shaheed, Zia, and Warraich (1998) provide an overview. They note that the constitutions of 1955-58 allocated 10 reserved seats for women for 10 years. In this arrangement, women in designated constituencies were given two votes—one for a general seat and one for a reserved seat. However, no elections were held under this constitution, as the Constituent Assembly was dissolved in 1954 (ibid: 1998).

The military government that followed disrupted the democratic process and curtailed women's political representation. The 1962 Constitution, introduced by General Ayub Khan, eliminated territorial representation and instituted indirect elections for women (Shaheed, Zia, and Warraich (1998). Under this system, an electoral college composed of National Assembly members elected women to reserved seats, which were limited to six in number (ibid: 1998). This pattern persisted until 1969, when a significant political movement overthrew Ayub's regime (ibid: 1998). Subsequent constitutions continued the practice of indirect elections for women via reserved seats, adversely affecting women's political participation.

Between 1956 and 1970, governments in Pakistan encouraged women's participation in specific sectors, such as social welfare and government departments, but largely excluded them from the political realm (Shaheed, Zia, and Warraich (1998). Although a

few exceptional women from upper-class backgrounds were appointed as ambassadors, politics was generally not viewed as an important area for women's involvement (Khattak, 1996). Moreover, many women did not see politics as a viable career option.

It was not until 1971, when the first democratic government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) under the late Zulfikar Bhutto was established, that the status of women in Pakistan began to improve. During the PPP government, the Constitution of Pakistan was introduced in 1973, representing the first comprehensive constitution developed with input and democratic consent from all provinces. This constitution was significant as it ensured no discrimination based on sex (Shaheed, 1998).

The PPP also implemented additional initiatives, including establishing a Women's Wing within the party. The 1973 Constitution increased reserved seats for women to 5 percent in national and provincial assemblies, although it still maintained the principle of indirect elections (ibid: 1998).

In 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq seized power through a military coup and imposed martial law until 1988. His 11-year regime was marked by brutal military governance. Zia claimed that previous governments were too liberal and Western in their policies, vowing to Islamize the Pakistani state and society.

Women were significantly impacted during this period of Islamization. Government authorities actively worked to reduce women's participation in public life, implementing measures that rolled back women's rights and visibility. It was during Zia's regime that regressive laws targeting women, such as the Hudood Ordinance, were introduced.

Additionally, the Council of Islamic Ideology was established, promoting some of the most backward views on women's rights. When martial law was lifted in 1985, the Eighth Amendment was added to the constitution, validating all ordinances enacted during the martial law period. As a result, many legal challenges regarding women's rights remained unresolved.

In July 1983, Zia-ul-Haq established the Ansari Commission to develop an Islamic political framework. The Commission recommended restrictions on women's political participation, including separate electorates for men and women, prohibitions against women and non-Muslims becoming heads of state, and requirements stipulating that women candidates for the assembly must be over 50 years old and obtain written permission from their husbands to contest seats in both the national and provincial assemblies. Interestingly, Zia did not implement these recommendations; instead, in 1984, he doubled the quota of reserved seats for women to 10 percent. However, this increase was largely symbolic, as Zia's policies and the laws enacted during his rule remained fundamentally oppressive.

The 1988 general elections brought Benazir Bhutto to power. Given the low number of women contesting for general seats that year, it was clear that special affirmative action would be necessary to increase women's representation in the assemblies (Shaheed:

2002). In 1989, some Senators from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) introduced a bill to facilitate this in the Upper House. However, before the bill could be acted upon, Bhutto's government was dismissed in August 1990, preventing any amendment to the Constitution that would increase the number of reserved seats for women (Farida Shaheed, 1998). The subsequent government led by Mian Nawaz Sharif, representing the *Islami Jamhuri Ittehad* (Islamic Democratic Alliance), did not take affirmative steps to enhance women's reserved seats.

In 1993, Benazir Bhutto returned to power; however, her government was once again dismissed by the President of Pakistan under the Eighth Constitutional Amendment, which grants the President the authority to remove an elected government if it is deemed corrupt or ineffective (Shaheed, 2002). This dismissal allowed Nawaz Sharif to regain power. Overall, from 1988 to 1998, women were significantly underrepresented in Pakistan's legislative bodies.

Unlike Zia-ul-Haq, who focused on Islamising the Pakistani state and society during the Cold War, General Musharraf adopted a more liberal approach in the post-Cold War era, which marked a transition from military dictatorship.

In 2002, Musharraf allocated 60 out of 342 seats in the National Assembly for women, representing 17.5% of the total seats—three times more than the previous allocation of 20 seats. These seats were distributed to political parties in proportion to their electoral results. Each party was required to submit a list of 60 female candidates to the electoral authorities before the elections, with names drawn from the top of these lists.

For the Provincial Assemblies, 128 out of 728 seats were reserved for women, amounting to 17.6%. According to the most recent election results in Pakistan, women now occupy 21% of the seats in the national legislature. Additionally, four out of 100 seats in the Senate are reserved for women. These statistics reflect the progress made in women's political representation in Pakistan during Musharraf's era.

Between 2008 and 2013, 76 women candidates were elected, including sixteen in general seats and sixty in reserved seats¹. Between 2013 and 2018, seventy women politicians were elected, including nine in general seats, sixty in reserved women's seats, and one in non-Muslim seats². In 2018, the National Assembly of Pakistan had 342 members, including 69 women. Of these women, 60 Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) were elected to reserved seats designated explicitly for women, while one was elected to a seat reserved for minorities³. In 2024, eight women MNAs were directly elected to general seats, and 53 women became national parliament members⁴.

In conclusion, the state's approach to women's representation in national and provincial parliaments has been discriminatory. Women's political participation has depended mainly on the government's stance. Without effective mass mobilisation among women,

¹ <https://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/former-members/13th%20National%20Assembly.pdf>

² <https://na.gov.pk/uploads/content/All-MNAs-14th%20Assembly.pdf>

³ https://na.gov.pk/en/mna_list_w2.php?list=women

⁴ <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/PK/PK-LC01/data-on-women/>

even a few female politicians at the national level have found it challenging to create significant opportunities for broader political involvement.

Women parliamentarians face numerous challenges, including pervasive socio-cultural taboos and the high costs of running successful election campaigns. These obstacles limit women's ability to contest elections and contribute to the dominance of familial connections in securing party nominations. Additionally, women legislators elected through indirect means often struggle with issues of credibility and effectiveness. Unlike their male counterparts, they frequently lack representation of their electorate or constituency, diminishing their influence in decision-making processes within their political parties and legislative assemblies.

Women politicians elected to reserved seats encounter difficulties making meaningful contributions to legislative bodies due to their lack of experience in canvassing and their limited understanding of the issues, legislation, or policies at hand. As a result, they are often excluded from powerful political domains, such as standing committees and key party decision-making processes.

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