

**AFGHANISTAN'S NEW DAY: A PROMISING STEP FOR AFGHAN
WOMEN**
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Four years after the U.S.-led coalition and Afghan resistance overthrew the Taliban, Afghanistan is still stumbling on the path to peace and stability. However, there are glimmers of hope everywhere. The country is nowhere near as violent as it was before, although in the past few months there has been an increase in insurgent attacks. It has a new constitution that enables the establishment of civil institutions like an independent judiciary and human rights commission; and foreign investment is trickling in. The brightest development has been the inauguration of the new Afghan Parliament on December 19th, 2005, after more than a 30-year absence from the political scene, and the political involvement of Afghan women in the rebuilding of their country.

Significant milestones have been achieved by the Afghan people over the last few years that have enabled the new Afghan Parliament to convene. The Bonn Accords of December 2001 created a roadmap for the next few years to establish security, begin reconstruction and create the first institutions of a democratic government. Meetings in Tokyo in 2002 and Berlin in 2004 continued the process. To the surprise of many, Afghanistan met those initial targets despite much skepticism. Four years later, we are witness to the successful implementation of a modern constitution, presidential and parliamentary elections, and many other benchmarks that were set at these international donor conferences. The popularly elected parliament marked this country's final step in its transition to democracy as set forth in the Bonn Accords.

Afghan women are finding their voices in many sectors of society including politics. They have started to become actively involved in the political arena of their country, demanding increased representation in government and legislatures. Out of the 5,800 registered candidates who participated in the historic parliamentary elections on September 18th, 2005, 565 were women. The new constitution of Afghanistan, instituted in January 2004, mandates that at least a quarter of the elected posts be reserved for women-putting the country ahead of Australia, Canada, the U.K. and the U.S. in terms of female representation in government. This

means that women are guaranteed 68 of the 249 parliamentary seats, and 26 of the 102 seats reserved for the senate, or upper house.

Election results indicate that many Afghan men voted for Afghan women in the recent elections, because some of the highest vote recipients were women - even in some of the most conservative provinces of the country - resulting in more elected seats than the 25% quota originally reserved for them. The new parliament is a challenging mix of former mujahideen, communist and Taliban leaders, who may try to push for reinserting religion into the politics of the country. The academics, technocrats and women may try to liberalize the society, which in turn could result in some potentially dangerous tugs of war among the new parliamentarians. Some analysts believe it could take months before the parliament will be able to fully perform its duties. Many of the legislators have little or no experience in politics and scant knowledge about how a parliament functions.

Regardless, the parliament is seen as a significant step towards the development of a modern Afghan nation, carving out a legally protected space for women to participate and engage in politics and overall society. Despite their second-class status in much of Afghanistan, women appear committed to the country's democratic process. More than 40 percent of the eight million who voted in the October 2004 presidential election were women, and similar figures hold true for the September 2005 parliamentary elections. But, what has been ratified and mandated by the Afghan people and government must now be put into practice for real change to occur. Afghanistan has much work ahead, and hopefully with the continued support of the international donor community and peacekeeping troops, its fragile new democracy will develop and flourish so the Afghan people can become truly self-sufficient and independent, living in peace and security.

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