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WOMEN, DALIT SEEK CHANGE FROM HISTORIC ELECTIONS IN NEPAL



Kathmandu, April 9, 2008: Advocates for lower-caste Dalit and women are anxiously awaiting the outcome of tomorrow's election in Nepal, and hoping that a peaceful vote will boost their efforts to end discrimination.

Hundreds of Dalit and women candidates are standing in the elections – a historic achievement. But the main political parties appear lukewarm about their involvement, Meanwhile, recent reports have found Dalit being barred from water, schools and temples throughout rural Nepal.

Nepalis will choose 601 deputies to serve on a Constituent Assembly for two years and draft a new constitution. The process is complex. Voters will select one group of 345 deputies by proportional representation (PR), under which they will effectively vote for a political party. Another 240 deputies will be chosen in a straight vote on the basis of constituencies. The Prime Minister will fill the remaining 26 seats.

Civil society groups were instrumental in forcing the King's ouster and restoring democracy in spring 2006, and they are looking to tomorrow's elections to set the tone for profound social changes.

The credibility of the elections was damaged by two postponements, and all agree that success on Thursday will hinge upon whether the vote is free from violence. Several armed groups have issued threats and the Maoists have also dropped hints that they may revert to armed struggle if they fare badly in the election. A recent report by the UN

criticized the Maoists for nominating fighters for the Assembly, raising questions about the Maoist commitment to the democratic process.

The main concern for Dalit advocates is that Dalit will be under-represented. Under an agreement, the eleven major parties are all observing quotas, which means that 13% of the candidates chosen by PR will be Dalit. But only 162 candidates (4 percent) who are competing in the constituencies are Dalit and even they face stiff competition.

One Dalit candidate, Ram Bahadur Swornakar, has been campaigning for the Jana Morcha party against a former Prime Minister in the western region of Mahendragar. Mr Swornakar has borrowed the equivalent of \$1,000 at a high rate of interest to cover his costs and is traveling the constituency on a seven year-old bicycle.

If Dalit candidates fail to win any constituency seats, it will leave Dalit with around 5 percent of the total Assembly members, even though Dalit comprise up to 20% of Nepal's total population. This, say advocates, could lessen enthusiasm for the political process among Dalit and make it harder to lobby for strong provisions against caste discrimination in the new Constitution.

The need for such lobbying has been driven home by a recent e-Bulletin from the Jagaran Media Center (JMC), a leading Dalit organization and partner of The Advocacy Project (AP), which reports that Dalit children are routinely beaten for touching "non-Dalit" water, abused in school, and barred from entering temples.

Many women advocates in Nepal are also disappointed by the voting formula. The political parties have agreed that women will fill a third of all seats in the Assembly, and half of those on the party lists are women. But women account for only 367 (9.29 percent) of the 3947 candidates standing in constituencies. This makes it unlikely that the Assembly target will be met.

At the same time, says the JMC, advocates are also fighting back. In one village, Duwas, Dalit women have successfully resisted attempts to make them eat dead animals and observe other traditional customs, and forced village elders to pay equal wages to women. Anyone who marries below the age of 20 will be fined.

Advocates have always hoped that this sort of grassroots advocacy would be spurred a strong presence by women and Dalit in the new Assembly.

The Advocacy Project will be sending five Peace Fellows to work with the JMC and other civil society advocates in Nepal this summer.

- Read more about the struggle by Dalit in Nepal (<http://advocacynet.org/nepal-s-dalit-need-affirmative-action-ad/>) and reports from the [Jagaran Media Center](#)

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