
AdvocacyNet
News Bulletin 145
April 23, 2008

NEPAL WOMEN AND DALIT RIDE INTO PARLIAMENT ON MAOIST COATTAILS



Kathmandu, April 23, 2008: Around 250 women and lower-caste Dalit have been elected to Nepal's new 601-member Constituent Assembly, reversing centuries of exclusion and raising hopes for a major political push to eradicate discrimination from Nepali society.

With almost all of the results of the April 10 election now confirmed, it is clear that the Maoists won a sweeping victory, just two years after abandoning a violent civil war. Women in particular were able to ride on the coattails of the Maoists' triumph. Around 200 women deputies will sit in the new Assembly, one third of the total.

The 55 Dalit deputies will account for around nine percent of the total deputies. This is below the national percentage – Dalits account for up to 25% of the population – but it will still create a strong lobby for measures to outlaw caste in the new constitution.

“This is very surprising. The electors punished the high class,” said Parmod Dhakal, Executive Director of the Canada Forum for Nepal, which works with the Nepal diaspora in Canada. “The parliament will be very representative of the population – more representative than in many other countries.”

Mr. Dhakal said that the result had given Nepal a good chance of peace over the next two years. If true, this would vindicate a complex electoral formula which required Nepalis to

cast two ballots – one for constituencies (“first past the post”) and a second for parties (proportional representation, or PR).

The Maoists won 120 of the 240 constituency seats but were denied an overall majority because they only secured 105 of the 335 seats chosen by PR. This will give the Maoists enough seats to form a government but not enough to impose a radical agenda. Many hope it will also provide them with a strong incentive not to return to violence.

The other unexpected winner was the Madhesi minority in southeast Nepal, which has threatened independence and launched violent attacks in Southeast Nepal since the restoration of democracy in 2006. The Madhesi People’s Rights Forum, a new party, won around 50 seats which many hope will co-opt the Madhesis into the political process.

Advocates for human rights see the election of so many women and Dalit as proof of a historic change of attitude. “Women candidates contested with top male leaders of big parties and won fairly with large amounts of votes” writes Sharmila Karki, President of Jagaran Nepal, an advocacy group that field 500 women election monitors.

Pramod Dhakal said that many Dalit candidates received large numbers of votes even when they did not win, suggesting that voters did not oppose them on the basis of caste. This, he said, was indicative of profound social change.

The Maoists took women and Dalit more seriously than the other parties, showing that they understood the country’s desire for change. Of the 29 women deputies elected in direct competition, 23 were put forward by the Maoists. Six of the 10 Dalit likely to be elected in the direct vote were Maoist candidates.

The Congress party only fielded two women candidates and did not propose a single Dalit, which may explain why the party was decisively rejected by voters in spite of having steered Nepal through two difficult years. The party was also hurt by fielding a bloc of monarchist candidates who supported the widely-detested King Gyanendra.

The Advocacy Project is recruiting two Peace Fellows to work with the [Jagaran Media Center \(JMC\)](#), a prominent Dalit advocacy group, in the towns of Kathmandu and Butwal this summer.

Meanwhile, **a new report** from the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (CHRGJ) at New York University sets out a series of recommendations for ensuring that Dalit rights are protected by the new Constitution (<http://www.chrgj.org/>).

#

AdvocacyNet is a service of The Advocacy Project (AP) that is offered to advocates working for human rights and social justice at the community level. AP is based in Washington, DC. Phone +1 202 758 3328. For more information visit our [website](#) or email us at dcoffice@advocacynet.org.