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Afghan candidates face more vocal constituency: women.

Presidential contenders are meeting with women's leaders ahead of the Aug. 20 vote. US forces targeted a Taliban stronghold Wednesday in bid to shore up security for the election.

By Gayle Tzemach Lemmon | *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

On a recent humid summer morning, two dozen women stream into a conference room overlooking a lush garden at Afghan presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani's headquarters. They have come to hear the former finance minister's policies on women – and to tell him what they want from the next administration: more female representation in senior political positions.

"It is worth mentioning that 42 percent of the voters in the last election were women, and it is expected that women voters may top 5 million in the upcoming vote," begins one woman as she stands to read the group's opening statement, which kicks off a lively 90-minute discussion about security, the economy, and the importance of women in government.

Former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and President Hamid Karzai have also held such meetings with these women leaders – Mr. Karzai hosting a group for a three-hour lunch at the presidential palace. Organized by the umbrella Afghan Women's Network (AWN), the gatherings mark the most serious effort Afghan women have yet made to hold the candidates accountable for campaign promises made in their name.

"We were not able to unify and to have one voice last time," says AWN's executive director Afifa Aziz, referring to the 2004 presidential race, Afghanistan's first-ever direct election for the country's top office. "We needed some time to organize, to grow, to mobilize."

This election season, say Ms. Aziz and other community leaders, things are different. They have learned a lot about politics and advocacy in the past seven years. And though some are hesitant to call the nascent efforts a full-blown women's movement, few doubt that women have come a great distance when it comes to knowing and advocating for their own rights.

On Aug. 4, women from across the country met in Kabul to launch the "5 Million Women" campaign aimed at bolstering "women's political participation in order to ensure the rule of law and gender equality."

"Today women are really learning the ups and downs of politics," says Palwasha Hassan, who heads a nongovernmental organization (NGO) promoting women's political and legal-rights awareness. "Women are learning to use the same tools as men; they are learning what real power is. And real power means you have a constituency, so people have to listen to you."

ORGANIZE AND MOBILIZE

Community leaders say that when it comes to campaigns, women understand that it is all about organization and mobilization.

"We don't have military power," says Orzala Ashraf, a women's rights advocate and AWN board member. "What we have are grassroots connections through our social networks among the communities. We may

not have guns, but we have the ability to mobilize."

That grassroots strength could be valuable should the election turn from what was expected to be an easy Karzai victory into a tighter contest that leads to a fall runoff.

WOMEN: 40 PERCENT OF NEW VOTERS

Women represent nearly 40 percent of the 4.5 million citizens newly added to the country's previous roster of 12.5 million voters. Though many females here are expected to follow their family's lead in deciding whether and for whom they will turn out, local women's groups are getting the word out that women have a right to their ballot – and should make their voices heard come Aug. 20.

"We want women to know of the value of their vote," says Mary Akrami, who heads the Afghan Women Skills Development Center, an NGO. "And we will vote for those who support us."

Ms. Akrami and other women active in politics say they learned valuable lessons from the recent fight over the country's Shia Personal Status law. After reading the legislation, which stated, among other things, that a woman must submit to sexual relations with her husband when he desired, women's rights advocates banded together to win the attention of reporters and supporters outside Afghanistan, even drawing comment from US President Barack Obama, who called the law "abhorrent."

"Now we stand and raise our voices through the media," says Akrami.

"Everyone is talking about the women's movement; this is the first time we've seen this."

The international uproar over the bill, say women's advocates, forced political leaders to start paying attention to women as an interest group.

"The candidates have no choice but to take women seriously, because this country is no longer living in isolation," says Ms. Ashraf. "Candidates can't overlook or underestimate the role women will play."

FINDING TIME FOR WOMEN'S RALLIES

The campaign calendar shows that candidates are getting the message. The three leading contenders have all held rallies targeting women voters and have promised to focus on issues such as security, education, and justice, along with women's representation in government.

"Before, women did not have the right to ask for anything for themselves," said Afghan parliamentarian Hawa Allam Nuristani just before she introduced President Karzai, whom she is supporting, at a female-focused campaign event. "Now all the candidates have a women's policy."

"You can see this is a big change," she said, gesturing at the green tent full of women, many of whom were braving the heat in their *burqas*.

ENOUGH SECURITY TO VOTE?

Still, women's advocates worry that all the candidates are quick to promise but slow to deliver once in office. Voter apathy across the country remains high.

And the insurgency is gripping ever-larger swathes of the south and east. On Wednesday, some 400 marines and 100 Afghan soldiers went into Now Zad district in Helmand Province, known as a Taliban stronghold, in a bid to

bolster citizens' ability to vote. Insecurity looms as the biggest threat to participation, a concern of particular relevance to women: If families think the danger too great, far fewer women are likely to end up at the polls come election day.

Despite the slew of daunting challenges, however, women leaders say that they are making progress.

"Step by step, women have gained this chance and we must make sure we don't lose it," says Mari Nabard Aeen, a journalist and founder of the women's weekly newspaper Seerat. "We have to make the most of this opportunity and hold the candidates accountable."

That, says Ashraf, will be the true test of success. "Preelection advocacy is only 50 percent of our mission," she says. "The other 50 percent comes afterward. Right now, we are at the beginning of our movement."

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