

Afghan woman candidate packs gun, wears trousers

16 Aug 2009 05:08:39 GMT

Source: Reuters

(For more on Afghanistan, click on [ID:nAFPAK])

By Kamal Sadat

KHOST, Afghanistan, Aug 16 (Reuters) - Like many a village elder campaigning for a seat on a provincial council in rural Afghanistan, Okmina begins each day donning a black turban, strapping on a pistol and heading out to talk to neighbours.

The difference is she is a woman, dressed as a man.

Watching Okmina meet with villagers in traditional Afghan men's baggy trousers and long shirt, with a few strands of red henna-dyed hair poking out from the black turban coiled around her head, it is hard to tell she is not a man, until she speaks.

"I dress like a man, especially during this election period when security is not good," said Okmina, who, like many Afghans, uses only one name.

"For my campaigning, I have to go to remote parts in my area where it is not safe for me to go as a woman," she said laughing.

Afghanistan's constitution reserves a quarter of provincial council seats for women, guaranteeing them a role in political life, but in deeply conservative areas where women are expected to cover up and stay home, they can be a target for defying traditional roles.

FORCED INTO HIDING

There are nearly 350 women registered as provincial council candidates in the Aug. 20 poll, about 10 percent of the total. The United Nations says many have faced threats, some have been forced into hiding and others have had to curtail campaigning.

Two women are also among the 35 challengers to Hamid Karzai for the presidency, although they are both seen as unlikely to get more than 1-2 percent.

Male villagers in Okmina's remote province seem to relate to her just as they would to a man, discussing their problems with her while their children scurry about her feet.

Okmina is not married and has no children of her own, but lives with her extended family in Tani district of Khost province, a particularly conservative area bordering Pakistan's tribal region.

She says she started wearing men's clothing, ditching the all-enveloping burqa worn by many women in Afghanistan, when she was made a tribal elder in her community, settling disputes among tribes in Tani and neighbouring districts.

She gave up her duties as a tribal elder and decided to run in the provincial election after she said she gained massive support from people all over her province. She says she wants to help others become like her.

"Women don't have rights in Afghanistan. If there are rights, it is too little. There is a big difference between men and women. Here a man can say anything he wishes but a woman's voice is always suppressed," she said.

Voters should not look at a candidate's gender, but at their qualifications, she said.

"It is not important whether you are a man or a woman. It is important to serve the desperate people of Afghanistan." (For more Reuters coverage of Afghanistan and Pakistan, see: <http://www.reuters.com/news/globalcoverage/afghanistanpakistan>) (Additional reporting by Hamid Shalizi in KABUL; Writing by Jonathon Burch; Editing by Peter Graff; jonathon.burch@thomsonreuters.com; +93 794 354 074; Reuters Messaging: jonathon.burch.reuters.com@reuters.net) (If you have a query or comment on this story, send an email to newsfeedback.asia@thomsonreuters.com)



URL: <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/SP399964.htm>

For our full disclaimer and copyright information please visit <http://www.alertnet.org>