

Conference Report

The Performance of Women in the Egyptian Parliamentary Elections of 2000

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Over the period of two days, March 28 and 29, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) in cooperation with the British Council and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, held in Cairo, Egypt the first conference on Women and Parliamentary Elections: The Present Situation and Perspectives for the Future.

The Conference attended by 430 women political activists and leaders from 10 different governorates was divided into six sessions. Research papers were presented by 30 different political and social scientists and members of parliament.

The conference established that there were three major "shocks" to the political system as a result of the parliamentary elections that were held in October and November 2000.

First: Upper Egypt turned out not to be as conservative as is the commonly understood among politicians, intellectuals and others because two women have been elected to serve that region in Parliament: Nariman El Daramally and Awatef Kahk.

Second: The Judiciary played a positive role even though in some cases, the judges were not aware of the situation outside the polling room. Yet the elections were the "cleanest" in many years. However, there is still much room for improvement.

Third: The official National Democratic Party (NDP) did not do as well as they have been accustomed to do in the past. The NDP is in shock, some of the participants at the conference said. There are now about 86 members of Parliament (even among those who have switched to the NDP) who reached Parliament without the traditional allegiances and who do not owe any favors or allegiance to the

NDP hierarchy. It is still early (only 3 months after the elections) to judge the overall performance of the new parliament but that is definitely something to watch. This is an important development.

Furthermore, the NDP and the other political parties are taking stock in how well the "unorganized" Muslim brotherhood did this time. The Muslim Brotherhood is in reality a well-organized group to be reckoned with and is very active in many communities in Egypt. It is still early (only 3 months after the elections) to judge the overall performance of the new parliament but that is definitely something to watch.

Nehad Abu El Komsan, director of the ECWR, presented a report analyzing the performance of women in parliamentary elections. The report covers 24 electoral districts out of a total of 222 and is divided into five sections: 1) the legislative framework of elections in Egypt; 2) the field observation reports; 3) case studies of some of the women candidates and the reasons behind their winning a seat in the parliament; 4) a study of 35 women candidates for the parliament; 5) recommendations and appendices.

Further, the ECWR has a program of training of political cadres that began in 1999 with 25 women. Seven of those women ran for seats and two of them won: Ms. Nariman El Daramally and Ms. Azza El Kashef, both graduates of the ECWR School for Cadres. The ECWR is currently working with 75 women and would like to work with more potential women leaders if they can receive more funds. The ECWR is receiving many requests for training by members of parliament and activists from all the political parties in Egypt.

Final Conference Recommendations
1. To: Mr. President of the Republic

Use the tools/mechanisms of the Constitution and the law to enable women to be appointed in the judiciary, to the presidency of universities and to other such positions of leadership and responsibility that can affect change.

2. To: The National Council for Women (NCW) and other institutions interested in promoting the political participation of women.

Acknowledging the active and effective role that the National Council for Women has played in support of the political participation of women in political life in general and in the parliamentary elections in particular. And also taking into consideration the many serious efforts by NGOs and research institutes that are concerned with women political participation;

The conference recommends the following:

a. The creation of a fund to cover the expenses of women candidates in election campaigns either based on the recommendation by the political party to which she belongs or her trade union, professional syndicate, chamber of commerce or non-governmental organizations.

b. The creation of a data base to track different kinds of discrimination against women, including tracking her progress in participating in representative councils and the suggestion of practical ways to fight such discrimination.

c. To lobby the Ministry of Administrative Development in order to consider women's political participation as one of the aspects of job evaluation; even if the participation was in the form of labor union committees, local government councils, popular committees in the governorates, or local village councils. And to make sure that her political participation is not in contradiction with her executive duties, especially if the conditions of her political work demanded taking time off during work hours.

d. To request that the administration take into consideration the improvement of women's economic situation, especially their working conditions, wages, benefits and allowances in the public sector, government agencies, ministries, other government bodies and in local government.

e. The drafting of a long-term plan to provide assistance and training workshops and to prepare cadres to participate in the upcoming elections in 2005.

f. The setting up of didactic programs to raise the political consciousness and education of women in a clear and easy manner and explain their political rights.

g. The holding of training sessions for women leaders in the different political parties and in all the governorates in order to raise their awareness of national women's issues and improve their organizational skills in recruiting women to political parties.

h. The need to always introduce new faces, avoid the centralized group of leaders and allow new groups of women to re-juvenate the council's work and the women's political movement. In this respect, we request that all women

candidates in the last parliamentary elections become members of the NCW and be encouraged to run in future elections.

i. To look into new ways whereby the Council's role can be enlarged to become a pressure group in favor of women's issues, on both the national and local levels. The necessity of assisting candidates to join councils of professional syndicates and to encourage many of them to run for a position within those organizations. There has to be a greater interest in the professional associations which constitute with the political parties an important constituent of civil society and through which women's skills and abilities can be made known, i.e. knowledge and practice.

j. Funding should be made available for current female members of parliament and women political leaders to improve their skills. This will help public opinion review their negative opinion of women's ability to handle responsible representative positions and thus help them to be nominated to such positions.

k. A careful review of the situation of peasant women who helped relieve the land reform from its worst conditions yet have no place in its political leadership. Development of the critical female discourse which does not just support her femininity but also critically analyses details and assists in the clarification of the women's movement with a discourse that takes it forward.

3. To: The Social Development Fund (SDF)

The Conference reiterated the important and pioneering role of the Social Development Fund and recommended that the Administrative Board of the Fund adopt the following:

a. Allocate funding resources to fight unemployment among women, and prioritize their requests for loans and credits, finance their small projects, support family production projects, associations providing assistance to working women, as well as supporting training sessions for women on small businesses management, servicing the environment, economic, financial and managerial awareness in order to guide women as to investments milieu and its regulations, methods of democratic administration of economic activities, interaction with the surrounding environment and social activities.

b. Use the SDF funds and its projects to eliminate economic and social disparities between rural and urban women, and between women in the maritime and tribal areas. This requires the usage of modern techniques to improve the situation of women in rural areas and within the tribal culture as a priority.

4. To: The Egyptian Parliament

The Conference considered with a certain relief the environment surrounding the latest elections and the participation of the Egyptian woman as they showed a considerable increase in the political participation of women in the elections: the number of independent candidates reached 75

women, with a percentage of 1.76%, in comparison to 49 women and 1.23% during the 1995 elections. The present experience was also the launching point of a true change whereby women candidatures covered 25 Muhafaza instead of 23 in 1995, as they ran for election in two new Muhafazas: Suhaj and Al Wadi El Jadid. Consequently, we call upon the Parliament to realize the following:

a. To request from the Government the completion of elections in the districts where they were halted. The Conference is confident that Egyptian women will be present in Parliament, represented by Ms. Jihane Helfaoui, the eighth elected woman to Parliament.

b. The Conference appeals to the Members of Parliament to present a law proposal for the adoption of a system incorporating parties' rolls with individual election. This system may be of help in increasing the representation of women and would reflect their true role in political participation.

c. The Conference appeals to the Members of Parliament to present a law proposal compelling political parties, professional syndicates, representative councils in general to allocate a number of their seats to women, as per their initiative in assigning a number of seats to youth.

d. Determine a number of important Parliament hearings to be presided by the Council's Secretary, Dr. Amal Outhman, in order to prepare public opinion and present proofs on the scientific and political competence of Egyptian women, qualifying them to hold and manage critical positions in the country.

e. Create a new parliamentary commission called the Commission to Improve the Situation of Women which would collaborate with the National Council for Women as well as specialized organizations and institutions for the creation of a lobby within the Parliament to approve legislations and support opinions that help the political aspirations of women.

f. Review the Unified Labor Code so as to guarantee women's rights as per equal work opportunities, terms and conditions, with a special emphasis on the situation of women-farmers and other marginalized groups unprotected by the project.

5. To the Ministry of Information

The Conference invites the Ministry of Information to:

a. Increase and improve programs targeting the community in a way to raise awareness on women issues, and consider these issues critical components in the developing of the community as a whole.

b. Examine the different values disseminated in women programs presented on the media's national channels. Are these values commercial or productive? What is their link to the priority values for women, and how do they influence the way community regards them?

c. Design special programs focusing on women's mental capacities and recall the historic role of Egyptian women in community service.

6. To The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Higher Education

a. Amend the content of academic curricula and link it to the students and their daily concerns, inciting them to critically discuss different issues. Hence, students would become participants in the educational process instead of passive recipients.

b. Change the teaching methodology from transcription to dialogue and discussion, offering the students the chance to participate and interact freely and democratically, without submitting them to restrictions and dictatorship.

c. Restore extra-curricular activities, student bodies, autonomy systems as well as free election opportunities, nominations and representation to students unions.

7. To: The Ministry of Youth

The Conference highly regards the attempt of the Ministry of Youth to designate seats for women in the Administrative Boards within the Youth Center. Therefore, we call upon the Ministry of Youth to adopt a joint project with different NGOs active among women in order to build the political capacities of young girls/women from ages 15 to 18 years, rendering it possible for the future generation to participate in a political life for which they received training.

8. To: Local and International Funding Institutions

a. Encourage collaboration between the Egyptian Government and its NGOs in order to upgrade the situation of Egyptian women, cleanse Egyptian laws and legislations from all texts that may infer gender inequality or confer gender-based advantages and rights in leadership positions, regardless of competencies.

b. Allocate more funds and provide more attention to fact-finding and field researches that assist in uncovering the real problems of women, and the causes denying them access to leadership or decision-making influential positions.

c. Provide more support to the capacity building of local women leaderships, especially those programs that work on improving their capacities to negotiate and constitute lobbying groups.

d. Support youth-oriented programs in pre-university and university stages that develop their ideas on gender equality and fight their gender-based discriminating behaviors.

e. Give more attention to studies dealing with developing legal structures leading towards the institution of complete gender equity.

f. Provide attention and appropriate financial and technical support to develop women programs, whether led by the Government or NGOs.

g. The Conference believes that the political participation of women is the cause concerning the Egyptian community as a whole. Egypt will not progress without the participation of both men and women in building its future.