

Women and Local Governance in Algeria

Introduction:

In 1967, the Algerian government implemented the local governance system initially established during French colonial rule. Laws governing the local structure emphasized decentralization and divided administrative powers between local and provincial councils. According to Article 16 of the 1989 version of the Algerian Constitution, the elected local council is a key component of the decentralized structure. Accordingly, Algeria has 48 local councils divided according to the percentage of the population they represent. Each council is elected for five years through representational voting and seats are divided according to the electoral list which receives the most votes.

In the 1989 Constitution, the Algerian legislature acknowledged women's rights in the national laws. Women's rights to vote and be elected, as well as to hold head governmental positions, were endorsed through national laws coinciding with Algeria's commitment to upholding the international conventions governing women's rights. Government policies also encourage women's participation in political life.

Women's Participation in Elected National Bodies and Local Councils

The results of recent parliamentary elections reflect the low representation of women in elected national bodies and local councils. In the 2002 elections, 26 women out of 389 were elected (i.e. 6.68%). The study commissioned by CAWTAR faults the reluctance of political parties to nominate women for their electoral lists as a key reason for the low representation of women. In addition, it considers the success of the three women representatives in the Second Chamber and National Council to be largely due to the president's appointments since no woman was elected to the Chamber in 2002-2003. Additionally, the tactics of some political parties resulted in only the low rates of women elected to the national assembly.

With respect to women's representation in local councils, the last elections in 2002, in which women made up 8.26% of popular councils, demonstrates a parallel reality. To begin with, it is the first time that a woman ever succeeded in being elected to local councils. Three women were also elected at the provincial level. In the desert province of Buskra, for example, three women were elected to the popular provincial council, two of whom are members of the National Liberation Party and one a member of the National Democratic Alliance. Unfortunately, no women were elected to the local councils of this province. In Meila, an agricultural province, two women were elected to the provincial popular council. The first is a member of the National Liberation Party and the second is from the Reform Movement. Again, no women were elected to the local council of this province. In Betna Province, five out of 44 women were elected, in Tandouf Province, two out of 38 were elected and in Gustantine, three out of 43 women were elected at the provincial level. Typically, no women were elected to the local councils.

Despite the low levels of female representation, the increasing participation of women in local elections is thought to be related to the abrogation of the agency system, under which only the male head of the household votes on behalf of his family members, and to the diminishing electoral violence in recent years.

Obstacles Facing Women in Local Political Affairs

There are a number of complex and inter-related factors which henceforth have served as limiting factors to the political participation of Algerian women in local governance. It is clear that in order to definitively change the level of involvement of women in political affairs, the issue must be considered from a variety of different viewpoints. Accordingly, changes must be made to address the different obstacles facing women's participation.

In terms of socio-cultural factors, the prevalence of traditional discriminatory norms and high illiteracy rates among women, especially in rural and desert areas have been noted as the most significant obstacles to women's involvement in local governance.

From an economic standpoint, the lowering of living standards of women due to retrenchment associated with the transformation of the national economy from socialism to liberalization, the male domination of the economy, and women's lack of financial autonomy all contribute to the low participation of women.

Politically, there are several factors that contribute to the low involvement of women in local political affairs. Firstly, while women themselves demonstrate a strong reluctance to engaging in political activities, the lack of willingness of political parties to support women's candidacy and leadership also reinforces women's low level of confidence in themselves. The lack of political awareness among educated women is troubling and is worsened by the poor political skills of existing women electoral candidates, particularly in launching appealing political schemes to attract other women votes. Political ambivalence towards the quota system and the refusal of Islamic political parties to adopt a quota system are other noteworthy factors in analyzing obstacles facing women's participation in local political affairs.

Recommendations

Among the recommendations that were noted as most immediately necessary in order to attempt to bring about a change in the level of women's involvement in the political process and in local governance, the following were the most significant:

- The creation of advocacy programs to raise the level of political awareness among educated women
- The application of pressure on the national government to promote women cadre
- The encouragement of women's participation in national and local elections
- The targeting of political parties in order to convince them to support women members' candidacy and leadership and to support quota systems.

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