

## **Women's Efforts vs. Politicians' Power**

On Friday, January 25, 2008, MONFEMNET (National Network of Mongolian Women's NGOs) held the first video-conference with women activists from 9 aimags and 1 remote district. The goal was to hear aimag women's views on the recent parliamentary actions to first repeal the 30 per cent minimum quota for women candidates in the national elections and then to take a re-vote on the Presidential veto as the first vote resulted in accepting the veto on the repeal law.

The participating sites were Dornod, Dornogovi, Dundgovi, Sukhbaatar, Bayan-Ulgii, Zavkhan, Bayankhongor, Khuvsgul, Khovd aimags, Baganaur district and Ulaanbaatar city. Women represented diverse professions, civil society sectors, political parties as well as non-partisans. Without exception, women were highly articulate in presenting their analyses of the parliamentary actions and proposing next steps for women's collective action.

Unanimously, women stated the following;

- We resolutely oppose and condemn the parliamentary actions to repeal the quota for women candidates.
- We believe it was dictated by the desire of incumbent male parliamentarians to hold onto their political power at all costs and their failure to liberate themselves from traditional views that hold women inferior to men.

Further, rural women said that contrary to what main political parties and male politicians are claiming, there are many capable women in all parts of Mongolia and these women must be promoted systematically to take greater part in decision-making at local and national levels. At aimag levels too, they said, men are reluctant to share their power with women. Thus, a woman from Dornod reported that in their aimag only 2 out of 30 members of the Citizens' Representatives' Khural are women, only 1 of 9 CRK Presidium members is a woman, all dargas (bosses) are men while practically 60 per cent of aimag life is shouldered by women.

Aimag women said the time has come when Mongolian women must work together, regardless of party lines and aimag borders, to solve the critical issues they face without waiting for male politicians to save the day. It is not only right that women participate equally in decision-making processes, they said, women's political voice is sorely needed to adequately address Mongolia's development issues and promote ethics in politics. They also called for women's concerted action to promote potential women candidates and boldly use their voting power during the 2008 elections to elect women and gender-sensitive responsible men into national and local legislatures.

The video-conference was an exciting event for the aimag and city women that not only provided them with an opportunity to see each other face to face and exchange warm smiles, but also reinforced their confidence in their values and goals, strengthened their

sense of solidarity and charged them with additional energy. MONFEMNET is planning another video-conference with the remaining aimags within this week.

Another critical action taken by MONFEMNET is filing a complaint with the Constitutional Court on the grounds that the parliament violated several constitutional provisions and principles in taking a re-vote on the Presidential veto.

On January 10, 2008, the parliament accepted the Presidential veto on the law repealing the women's quota by a 37.7 per cent vote (by law, presidential veto is accepted by one third of the MPs' votes and rejected by two thirds). This was obviously a surprising and highly undesirable outcome for the majority of the male MPs. A number of MPs aggressively questioned the validity of the outcome and some even accused women MPs of destabilizing the political system and endangering the Constitution by requesting the President to issue the veto.

On January 11, the parliament took a re-vote on the grounds that a button was pushed on behalf of an absent MP. MONFEMNET holds that this move was unconstitutional for several reasons. First, there is no provision in the law, which allows for a re-vote based on the grounds that an absent MPs' button was pushed. Secondly, MP Ms. D. Arvin's button was also pushed in her absence on December 26, 2007, when the parliament voted on passing the law repealing the quota. That decision was not disqualified, which constitutes another breach of the constitutional principles that all are equal before the law. Third, MONFEMNET holds that the January 11 re-vote was held with a clear purpose of changing the votes of the 20 MPs that supported the veto the previous day. Indeed, only 6 MPs supported the veto the second time, the rest either voted against or were absent.

Those who consistently voted for the veto are: Mr. R.Amarjargal (Mongolian Democratic Party), Ms. D.Arvin (Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party), Mr. J.Batkhuuag (New National Party), Mr. M.Zorigt (Civil Courage Party), Ms. S.Oyun (Civil Courage Party), and Mr. M.Enkhsaikhan (New National Party). According to reports directly from some of these MPs, they experienced significant pressure from their fellow MPs to change their position on the veto.

Pressure is mounting against MONFEMNET members and partners as well. Anti-women articles have been published in some of the daily newspapers and magazines. A number of women have been verbally attacked in public for their active involvement in MONFEMNET's advocacy efforts. Anonymous threatening phone calls have been received by a woman journalist for airing 2 televised discussions with women and men opposing parliamentary decisions to revoke the quota and reject the veto.

These so far rhetorical acts of political violence against women and men who stand by them signify attempts to silence women's and citizens' voices in view of the upcoming parliamentary elections. They also prove that MONFEMNET is on the right track and

that 2008 elections are going to be critical in determining Mongolia's potential for a truly democratic, citizen-centered development in the future.

The road to that future does not depend solely on the fate of the 30 per cent minimum quota for several reasons. First, even if removed from the election law, provisions on 25-30 per cent quota for women are present in most political parties' bylaws. Therefore, there is still a chance for political parties to show they are committed to values of equality and democracy by nominating a significant number of women candidates. Secondly, the quota concerns only political parties. While the current election law was devised so as to favor the 2 main political parties, it is still possible, although extremely difficult, to run as independents. Thirdly, there is room for partnership with gender-sensitive, democratic and ethical male politicians. Fourthly, there are opportunities to promote greater representation of women in local legislatures.

In view of these opportunities, MONFEMNET is prepared to support women and men candidates who support gender justice, sustainable development, human rights, ethical politics, and democratic reforms in the 2008 elections in both national and local elections. MONFEMNET shall be developing its own platform for Mongolia's development addressing 10 critical policy issues identified by women from all walks of life. This platform shall serve as the substantive basis for voter education, candidate training and policy advocacy efforts during this election year and beyond.

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