

Friday, September 11, 2015

Conference calls for constitutional protection to local governments

ISLAMABAD: A national consultation on constitutional protection of local governments was organised by AAWAZ programme consortium partners, namely Strengthening Participatory Organisation (SPO), Aurat Foundation, Sungi, and South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAP-PK), on Thursday.

Apart from civil society members, prominent legislators, particularly members of Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reforms, attended the consultation. The parliamentarians pledged to support the constitutional amendment in Article 140-A of the constitution, providing time frame to hold local government elections. The legislators regarded the dialogue a timely initiative of AAWAZ, as the Committee on Election Reforms is likely to submit recommendations to National Assembly on strengthening local governments in Pakistan.

Parliamentarians in attendance included Senator Mohsin Laghari, Senator Farhatullah Babar, Senator Mian Ateeq, Naeema Kishwar, Senator Sitara Ayyaz, Maliha Khan, Anisa Zeb Tahir Khali and Dr Araish Kumar. The legislators and members of parliamentary committee on elections invited detailed recommendations from AAWAZ consortium partners to strengthen local governments and representation of the women, minorities and excluded groups. The participants also spoke about the role of provincial governments.

The dialogue between parliamentari-

ans and civil society organisation concluded with consensus that strengthening local governments requires both constitutional protections by National Assembly as well as change of mindset of the provincial governments to devolve powers at the local levels through national finance commission. The local government system needs constitutional protection to be more effective and efficient in Pakistan because it lost its sustainability due to lack of legal authorization, said Naseer Memon, Chief Executive SPO, at the opening of consultation. Aurat Foundation Chief Operating Officer Naeem Mirza added that although Article 140-A provides adequate constitutional, political, administrative and economic provisions for holding local government elections by provincial government but unfortunately provincial governments avoid the devolving the power to local governments and hence always use delaying tactics to hold LG elections, and thus obstruct its true soul by making it less authorized at local level while implementation. Naeema Kishwar, MNA-JUI-F, and member Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform, said the Committee proposed 145 days for re-election of local government. The committee is also working on other concerns like number of polling stations and proposed each polling station after one kilometre. The committee also proposed training of polling agents and political workers, she further said. The sub-committee of the Committee on Electoral Reforms will put these recom-

mendations on National Assembly's website, and hence the civil society and human rights activists may analyze and further suggest recommendations. According to 18th amendment, it is the responsibility of the provincial government to play their role in devolving powers to districts through local government system, Sajid Mansoor Qaisrani, Chief Executive Sungi Development Foundation delineated. Senator Aneesa, Zaib Tahirkheli, QWP, opined in the consultation while strictly condemning the decision of provincial government not to hold the elections on specific seats directly and also focused that this is against the law to deprive the voters from their right to choose their representatives directly because in this way true representation would not come in front. Zafarullah Khan, an eminent political activists, researcher and Chief Executive of Centre for Civic Education, demanded that local government elections should be held directly on special seats as done in Balochistan and KP and they further added that all political parties and civil societies is condemning this act of provincial government. Farhatullah Babar, Senator and eminent political leader added that political parties challenged this amendment in court and hoped that court would do justice in this case. He added that devolution of power is mandatory at the moment to serve the interest of common people in Pakistan. Consistence efforts are required to make amendments in the constitution. STAFF REPORT