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General election

Senate panel urged to encourage participation of women

RECORDER REPORT

ISLAMABAD: Representatives of civil society and local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) urged the Senate Special Committee on Election issues to encourage participation of women voters in the upcoming general election.

The Senate Special Committee on Election Issues held a public hearing to seek recommendations from the general public so that improvement could be made in pre-election, election and post-election arrangements. An NGO, Democracy Reporting International organized the event here on Wednesday.

Around 16 international NGOs participated in the public hearing and gave their opinion on various matter related to election issues. Senator Muhammad Jahangir Bader was the Convener and it was attended by Senator Muhammad

Ishaq Dar, Syeda Sughra Imam, Syed Muzafar Hussain Shah, Muhammad Zahid Khan, Sardar Fateh Muhammad Hassani, Molana Abdul Ghafoor Haideri, Islamuddin Shaikh, Kamil Ali Agha and Col (retd) Syed Tahir Hussain Mashhadi.

Some Members of the National Assembly were invited specially to take part in the discussion. Member National Assembly, Bushra Gohar revealed that a draft bill related to women's 10 percent quota on general seats was at the concluding stage in the National Assembly's Special Committee on Election. She suggested

that the representatives of FATA should be given the status of observers in the provincial assembly as FATA representation was not permitted under the constitution. She further suggested that electronic voting should be arranged in major cities to get rid of

bogus voters. The caretaker government should not comprise more than five ministers whose responsibility should be to oversee the election, she added.

Member NA from MQM, Dr. Abdul Kadir Khanzada suggested that the committee seek one time exemption from the Supreme Court of Pakistan to allow judicial officers to perform duties as returning officers. He further said that the Election Commission of Pakistan did not have the resources to provide transport facilities to voters for polling their votes.

Senator Ishaq Dar challenging the figures shared by the NGOs over the missing number of women voters from the electoral lists said that there was no authentic source to verify that an estimated 12 million women were not register voters for various reasons.

After 18th, 19th and 20th constitutional amendments, he said ECP has become stronger to perform its duty boldly and transparently. Credit went to parliament to provide constitutional protection to the Chief Election Commissioner and Members for five years.

He opposed the proposal for the allocation of 10 percent quota for women in the general seats. He felt it was not possible, as it required specific constituencies where these women could contest election.

He also declined the proposal that an anti-monopoly law should be implemented on political parties to promote healthy competition. He said that this law could provide protection to businesses, but are not applicable in political matters. "Anti-monopoly law can not end dynasty rule in the country", he maintained.

Syeda Sughra Imam said democracy could be improved by strengthening institutions. The Senate would continue working during election. She said that the recommendations of the joint parliamentary committee of the senate and the national assembly would be given final shape in consultation with the ECP.

Senator Jahangir Bader said that the public hearing on electoral issues is the landmark initiative of the Senate Committee, as it has never happened before in the history of the parliament. The committee, he said, intends to put forward recommendations for the ECP, NADRA and other institutions so that administrative measures could be taken in advance of the next general elections.

The organizations, which presented their recommendations in writing before the committee included Aural

Foundation, Centre for Civic Education (CCE), Development Communications Network (DevCom), Free and Fair Elections Network (FAFEN), Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Pak Women, Pattan Development Organization (Pattan), Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), PML Women Wing (PML), SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Sungi Development Foundation (Sungi), Democracy Reporting International (DRI), International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), National Democratic Institute (NDI), United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and UN Women.

They urged the parliament to play its role so that the much-needed agenda of immediately required reforms

could be carried forward. Ensuring full participation of women as voters as well as candidates was on top of the list of reforms among most of the participants. They agreed to the suggestions regarding introducing special measures for ensuring participation of women and legal consequences for barring the women from voting. Rationalization of provisions related to political finances, backing up the code of conduct with law and provision for parties for providing transportation to their voters were also among the key areas of reforms discussed by the civil society representatives. The civil society was unanimous in its call for making the electoral rolls effort free, and for the registration of those who are not included in the list especially women and making it accessible to the public for changes and corrections.