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Afghan women lose political power as fears grow for the future



Reuters, Kabul

A legal requirement that women make up at least a quarter of all provincial elected officials was quietly removed by conservative male parliamentarians, officials said, the latest in a series of decisions undermining advances in women's rights in Afghanistan. The change, engineered in mid-May, was only discovered by women members of parliament a few days ago. The action has sparked fears among women's rights activists that President Hamid Karzai's government is increasingly willing to trade away their hard fought gains to placate the Taliban as part of attempts to coax them to the peace table. Activists said it could also reduce the number of women serving in parliament's upper house, as most women are elected there via their role as elected provincial officials. "In negotiations you don't gain anything unless you also give something up," said prominent women's rights activist and MP Farkhunda Naderi. "This is a political strategy: to please (the Taliban) in peace talks they're willing to give up women's rights." Women entered Afghanistan's male-only political arena in 2001 soon after the overthrow of the hardline Taliban regime by a U.S.-led invasion. The law had previously set aside for women at least a quarter of seats in some 400 district and 34 provincial councils. Seventeen of 28 women in the upper house are appointed by Karzai. The remaining 11 must be chosen from among women sitting on district and provincial councils, but those positions are now under a cloud. The change was approved by parliament's lower house, the Wolesi Jirga, on May 22. Prominent parliamentarian Fawzia Koofi said female members did not discover the change until last week. "(They) removed it without informing us. We trusted that the law we signed off on was the same as previous drafts," she said, referring to the members who made the changes. The law still needs approval from the upper house and Karzai before being passed into law. Critics of the change told Reuters its removal will not only affect women's ability to serve in the upper house, but also do away with more than 100 seats in local government bodies nationwide that were previously guaranteed to women. "Women are not in the position to win votes in this country based on popular vote alone, this amendment is worrisome •they'll lose their voice," said Noor Mohammad Noor, spokesman for Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission. Conservative male parliamentarians backing the change said the concept of granting rights based on their gender was unconstitutional. "It's undemocratic to grant a seat to a woman even though a man had more votes, simply because the law favors her," said Qazi Nasir Ahmad Hanafi, head of the