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Guatemalan Women Fight for Right to Political Participation.

by Louisa Reynolds
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"More women, better politics" is the slogan of a publicity campaign, launched in July this year by a group of female academics and journalists, to raise awareness of the absence of female participation in politics.

With a US$6,750 donation from the UN Population Fund (UNPF), they placed 20 billboards in different locations in Guatemala City with a series of statistics that speak for themselves: in this country there are 138 men and 20 women in Congress, 12 of 13 Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) judges are male, not a single Cabinet member is female, and 327 of 333 mayors are male.

During the 2007 elections, of a total 29,821 candidates for both national and local offices, 87.3% were male and only 12.6% were female.

Ana Silvia Monzón, coordinator of the gender program at the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), attributes this huge disparity to three major factors: first, a lack of financial resources to fund a costly political campaign; second, less access to education for women, particularly in rural areas; and third, the prevalence of chauvinist and discriminatory cultural stereotypes, according to which women should be confined to the home.

Marielos Monzón, a columnist for daily newspaper Prensa Libre, believes that the problem can only be tackled by imposing compulsory quotas for female participation.

A bill that intends to impose lists of candidates that include an equal number of male and female candidates in all political parties has already been given the go ahead by the Comisión de Asuntos Electorales in Congress, which means that it could shortly be put up for debate.

The activists behind the More-women-better-politics campaign argue that similar laws have already been approved in other countries in the region, such as Costa Rica, with impressive results.

However, some female politicians do not entirely agree with affirmative action as it could lead critics to point out, fairly or unfairly, that women have been given jobs in politics as part of a compulsory diversity program and not based on merit. "My advice is that we should continue to educate ourselves as this is what will help us gain more spaces in politics," says Laura Reyes, an indigenous lawyer running for vice president with the center-right Compromiso, Renovación y Orden (CREO) party.

Record-breaking number of female candidates

In this year’s general elections, for the first time in Guatemalan history, three women are running for president: Nobel Peace laureate Rigoberta Menchú, of the Frente Amplio coalition; Adela de Torrebiarte, of the new Acción de Desarrollo Nacional (ADN) party; and Patricia Escobar Dalton de Arzú, of the Partido Unionista (PU).
Three women are also running for vice president: Congresswoman Roxana Baldetti, of the rightist Partido Patriota (PP), Laura Reyes, of the CREO party, and Raquel Blandón (wife of former President Vinicio Cerezo (1986-1991), of the Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER) party.

Former first lady Sandra Torres, leader of the official Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza-Gran Alianza Nacional (UNE-GANA) coalition, tried unsuccessfully to run for president but was barred from participating by the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) because of a constitutional prohibition that prevents a president’s immediate family members from running for office during the period immediately after the president leaves office, to prevent a dynasty from perpetuating itself in power.

Although Torres filed for divorce in April this year, the TSE argued that this was a legal ruse to circumvent the impediment against her participation Torres lodged a series of appeals against the TSE’s ruling and took her case to both the CSJ and the Corte Constitucional (CC), but lost (NotiCen, July 14, 2011).

The strong-willed former first lady was ranking second in the polls after retired Gen. Otto Pérez Molina, of the PP, the closest a woman has come to winning the general elections.

Female candidates with conservative discourse

Ana Silvia Monzón says that the unprecedented number of women running for president and vice president is not enough. "We see more women running for the top jobs but, at the same time, all candidates, including those who are female, are using a highly conservative political discourse".

During a presidential debate organized by the Conferencia Episcopal de Guatemala (CEG) in June, practically all candidates tried to curry favor with the most retrograde wing of the church by condemning abortion, homosexuality, in vitro fertilization, the use of contraception, and sex education for school children.

Patricia de Arzú, an evangelical Christian, quoted biblical passages on several occasions during the debate and went as far as describing homosexual relations as "an abomination."

Salvadoran-born Patricia Arzú is the wife of Guatemala City Mayor and former President Álvaro Arzú (1996-2000). As the Constitution forbids a president from seeking re-election, Álvaro Arzú prompted his wife, who has no political experience whatsoever, to run for office. She is widely regarded as a puppet, with Deputy Mariano Rayo visibly dictating the answers to every question she is asked by journalists during press conferences.

Monzón points out that candidates such as Arzú are hardly positive role models as examples of successful women participating in politics. She adds that, although many women are running for the top jobs in politics this year, female candidates still receive hostile treatment by the media and in public opinion as, unlike their male counterparts, they are judged on the basis of their physical appearance, dress sense, and private life, more than on their political agenda.

The most obvious example is the visceral hatred expressed by many political commentators against Sandra Torres. Even before she decided to run for office, she was often vilified in the media and portrayed as a power-hungry fiend.

Marcelo Colussi, a columnist for daily newspaper El Periódico, argues that there is nothing that evokes irrational hatred among the Guatemalan elite more than communists and the indigenous masses. "Sandra Torres is not a communist seeking to expropriate the lands of the rich to implement
a land reform. She is not indigenous...Why, then, is there so much resistance to her participation? Is this an expression of misogyny in a deeply patriarchal society?" asks Colussi.

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