

Women’s Voices in 2015 Elections



A women’s walk for peace with many of Inter Pares counterparts in Burma.

Election Year in Burma

Social justice activists in Burma are about to face a major dilemma. In late 2015, Burma will hold its first national elections since the “transition to democracy.” This could be a golden moment for community organizers to engage party platforms or to conduct grassroots electoral education. But, taking part in the election could be seen as an endorsement of a constitution that much of Burma’s civil society rejects.

Burma’s Constitution is deeply flawed. It was drafted by delegates selected by the military. It guarantees a quarter of the legislature seats for active-duty members

of the armed forces and ensures that the army is above the Constitution. As a result, the “civilian” government has no control over the country’s army. This is the same army that is responsible for forced labour and evictions, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence and other crimes – now making and approving national laws, with little concern for addressing impunity, injustice or gender inequality. It’s no surprise that women’s organizations, Ethnic groups, and the democracy movement have been fighting to change the Constitution for years.

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Politics in Sudan Need Women's Voices

On June 24th, 2014, five plainclothes men entered the Khartoum office of Inter Pares' counterpart, Salmmah Women's Resource Centre. They proceeded to intimidate staff and confiscate office equipment. They dismantled Salmmah's unique feminist resource library and seized all of their assets. Later, we learned that these men worked for the Sudanese Ministry of Justice and their mission was to shut down the organization.

It was a sad moment – a leading voice for women's rights in Sudan was silenced. But clearly, that voice had been successful in threatening the powerful and patriarchal status quo.

Peace and democracy can only thrive if many perspectives are heard. As Sudan approaches an election this year, open debate becomes even more critical, especially about

women's rights. Ever since current President Omar Al-Bashir came to power in a 1989 coup, the voices of women have been muted, despite their rich activist history. Discriminatory laws were adopted: they conflate rape and adultery, establish a rigid dress code for women, allow marriage at the age of puberty, and require women to have a male guardian who controls whether they are allowed to work or travel.

However, during the national elections in 2010, optimism prevailed. Activists had won a 25 percent quota for women in Parliament. Women's organizations collaborated

on the election campaign and women's perspectives were a visible part of the electoral discourse.

Another Inter Pares counterpart in Sudan, the Sudanese Organization for Research and Development (SORD), focuses on gender justice in Sudan. It is unclear if they will be able to openly influence electoral discourse during this year's elections as they did in 2010. The level of repression in Sudan may be too great.

Still, SORD continues to work on women's rights, sponsoring legal clinics serving women who have experienced violence, promoting the right of girls to education, and putting forward an alternative family law to replace the current discriminatory one.

Members of Salmmah, for their part, continue to work as individual activists, vowing to resurrect Salmmah one day when conditions allow.

We take inspiration from Salmmah's legacy and accomplishments, as well as in their determination and courage to press for change, for peace, and for democracy in the face of incredible odds. 

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RITA MORBIA



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Top: Somia at the University of Khartoum with a 2010 election poster.

Bottom: Salmmah's feminist resource library.

We Were *Up for Debate* 30 Years Ago. We Still Are Now.

BY CAROLINE ANDREW

Seeing the growth of the *Up for Debate* campaign, the movement for a nationally broadcast leaders' debate on issues identified by women, brings back a flood of personal memories. I moderated the 1984 women's debate, so far the only debate on women's issues that has taken place in Canada during a federal election. At the time of the election, John Turner was the Prime Minister and he was debating with Brian Mulroney, and Ed Broadbent.

I remember being very nervous on the night of the debate, and yet, when I met the women who were to ask the questions, Eleanor Wachtel, Kay Sigurjonsson, Francine Harel-Giasson, and Renée Rowan, I calmed down. They were all so intensely committed to clarifying the issues that were, and still are,

central to women's lives: inequality in income, day care, access to abortion and international peace. While

access to abortion is somewhat more available today, the closing of the Morgentaler clinic in New Brunswick reminds us that this battle is not yet won. Good public day care is even further away than it was in 1984 and needs to be fought for. Inequality in income

Politics can be, and should be, about issues that are central to the daily lives of women, and particularly to women double or triply disadvantaged.



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is still a vital issue for women, particularly for Aboriginal, immigrant, visible minority and disabled women.

Did the debate have an impact? It showed that politics can be, and should be, about issues that are central to the daily lives of women, and particularly to women doubly or triply disadvantaged.

For far too long politics has been seen as an arena primarily for men. Thanks to the efforts of committed women (and men) around the world, this vision is being transformed. Join me in calling for a women's debate among leaders in 2015. ☺



The *Up for Debate* campaign calls on Canadian federal leaders to make meaningful commitments to improve women's lives, at home and around the world.

Over 100 women's organizations – including Inter Pares – support the campaign and are seeking to create a national conversation on gender equality and women's rights in the lead-up to the next federal election.

Join us in building a Canada that works for women: support *Up For Debate!* www.interpares.ca/upfordebate

Election Year in Burma

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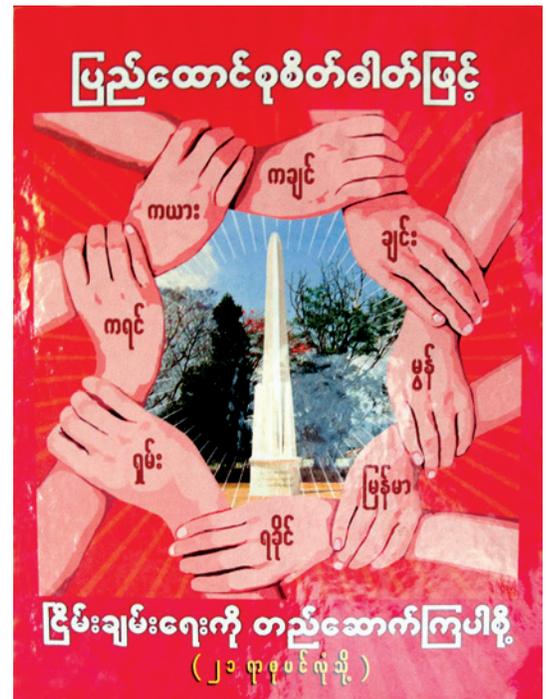
The current Constitution also gives almost no powers to the states (provinces), and ensures the state leadership is chosen by and answerable to the President. Ethnic people, who comprise at least 40 percent of the population, envision Burma as a federal country. The struggle for political control over Ethnic people's own lives is at the root of the country's sixty years of armed conflict. Federalism in Burma will only contribute to building peace if state governments are answerable to local people and have the legal and political jurisdiction to address state issues. Without enshrining meaningful federalism, the Constitution entrenches conflict.

The struggle for political control over Ethnic people's own lives is at the root of the country's sixty years of armed conflict.

New ceasefire agreements bring some hope of ending conflicts, but peace is not simply the absence of gunfire and grenades. Peace requires addressing root causes of conflict. Peace is about seeking justice for past atrocities and building confidence in an independent legal system. Peace involves sincere conversations about reconciliation. Peace is enabled by a political system which serves the interests of women and men.

How can Burma's civil society engage in an election when the Constitution is so devoid of democratic principles, and in a context without peace? Should they boycott the election because of the flawed Constitution, or will this further enable the military-aligned parties to stay in power? Should they engage in electoral education and political dialogue? Which tactics reduce the chances of a rigged election or yet another military coup?

Inter Pares works closely with over sixty community-based organizations in Burma,



This sticker was created by the Women's League of Burma. "With the spirit of a federal union... Let's build peace"

The monument is the site for the signing of the Panglong Agreement, and each hand identifies a different ethnic group: Kayah, Chin, Kachin, Mon, Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Myanmar.

mostly in the conflict-impacted Ethnic areas of the country, and these groups are discussing how best to handle this election year. This is why in March of 2015, Inter Pares will host women from Burma, to discuss elections and federalism with women from Canada and Sudan. Over our forty years of working for social justice, we have found these exchanges to be critical moments for reflection and collaboration. These shared moments break down isolation, build global solidarity and galvanize actions for change. ☺

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Charitable registration number (BN) 11897 1100 RR000 1.
Financial support for the *Bulletin* is provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada.

With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

ISSN 0715-4267