

YEMENI WOMEN PLUNGE INTO POLITICS

By Ahmad Mardini

In a region where large numbers of women are denied the right to drive, much less to vote, Yemeni women have the right to do both in this fledgling democracy. Women contested the elections here last month, which international observers said were generally free and fair, despite the scattered violence in the run-up to the polls. Nineteen of the candidates contesting for 302 seats were women.

Yemen is the only country in the Arabian peninsula where women have the right to vote, and the number of registered women voters has more than doubled to 1.3 million since the last parliamentary election in 1993, when two women won seats.

Women comprise a fourth of the 4.6 million registered voters. Though the vast majority are illiterate, they have learned to exercise their franchise, even if it is easily influenced by the decision of their men. In the rural areas, 80 percent of the women are illiterate, while the rate declines slightly to 70 percent in the cities.

At several boisterous rallies during the election campaign, women were key speakers with men cheering their candidates for parliament. Veiled women in the audience stood quietly at the back, but were present.

But everyone in Yemen acknowledges that men's approval is necessary for women to vote and work. In Southern Yemen, which merged with the north in 1990, women have lost some rights they enjoyed under the socialist government. Women were appointed as judges and even as leaders of the ruling Communist party. But with the victory of the conservative north in the 1994 civil war, many of those

gains disappeared.

Now, women activists see democracy as their arena of struggle. Some of them argue that while the government touts the development strides it has made, it gives lip service to women's rights. They say that women in the workplace still unsettle some in a country that remains conservative and fiercely proud of its traditions.

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NEW HISTORY TEXTBOOKS SPARK CONTROVERSY IN JAPAN

By Keiki Yamamoto

The Education Ministry decided to include the issue of "comfort women" (a euphemism for sexual slaves to former Japanese soldiers during World War II) in all seven history textbooks for use in junior high schools in 1997. This came after a long and persistent struggle by Japanese scholars, teachers and citizens, as well as a tenacious women's and citizens movement asking the Japanese government for apology and compensation to former "comfort women" in such countries as Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and China.

Countering this move is a group formed in December 1996 by Nobukatsu Fujioka, a professor of Tokyo University along with several scholars, intellectuals and businessmen. Calling themselves "A Group for Making Alternative History Textbooks," they strongly oppose the movement to teach historical truth, including the facts about the Japanese military invasion of other Asian countries, "comfort women," and the Nanjing Massacre, in order to prevent a similar

future tragedy by the Japanese people. They are quoted in the *Sankei* newspaper as criticizing the newly approved textbooks for 1997 as "parading a tremendously dark side, giving self-abusive and historical views against Japan." They have also begun to demand that the Education Ministry eliminate the description of "comfort women" from history textbooks.

Various politicians have reacted to the group's position. In June 1996, Diet members were organized into an alliance, "Japan with a Bright Future," by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Their purpose is to consider historical views and education problems in Japan. The alliance developed as a result of the "Diet Members' Alliance in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the End of the War" aimed at restoring what Japan lost after World War II and raising Japanese people who are "mentally healthy." Their first item was to discuss and present the "comfort women" issue. Among the group's leaders, Seiryō Okuno and Tadashi Itagaki argued that the issue of "comfort women" was private and not a historical fact. (See Resource Materials on Women's Labor in Japan No. 18) In addition to these remarks, Sirocco Kajima, the chief cabinet secretary, was quoted as saying that prostitution was state-regulated at that time. Poor women became prostitutes to earn money.

This provoked the anger of many Japanese. These remarks evidently stemmed from their contempt for women and feelings of Japanese superiority. They admitted that a war of invasion had been carried out, but also rejected the issues raised by the international women's movement, which seeks to tackle violence against women and the indignities suffered by female war victims in Asia.

Japanese women's groups and individuals made urgent ap-

