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The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam: Road Map for Women's Political Representation in India

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Abstract

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam also known as the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, represents a pivotal step in India's journey towards gender-balanced political representation. This paper critically examines the Act's potential impact on increasing women's share in legislative bodies, contextualizing it within India's historically low female representation—which stood at just 14.94% in the Lok Sabha and 14% in state assemblies as of 2024. Drawing upon data from the Election Commission of India, recent parliamentary debates, and international comparative frameworks, the study assesses how similar quota-based reforms have succeeded in countries like Rwanda (where women hold over 60% of parliamentary seats) and Nepal (where constitutional mandates have lifted female representation to around 33%). The analysis identifies challenges related to rotational reservation, party-level implementation, and socio-cultural barriers that could dilute the transformative potential of the Act. Nevertheless, it argues that the legislation is likely to shift policy priorities toward gender-sensitive governance, catalyze long-term institutional reforms, and foster broader inclusivity in democratic decision-making. The paper concludes by suggesting a roadmap for effective implementation: timely delimitation, capacity-building programs for women candidates, intra-party reforms to ensure fair ticket distribution, and robust monitoring mechanisms. Such measures, grounded in empirical evidence and global best practices, are crucial to translating legislative intent into substantive change in India's political landscape.

Keywords: Women's reservation, political representation, gender quotas, Indian democracy, legislative reform

Introduction

India's democratic paradox is rooted in its constitutional guarantees of gender equality under Articles 14 and 15, contrasted sharply by the enduring underrepresentation of women in legislatures. In the 18th Lok Sabha (2024), women account for just 13.6% of members—a negligible shift from 14.36% in 2019, and still well below the global average of 26.1% (IPU, 2024). The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (NSVA), passed in September 2023, aims to address this gap by mandating 33% reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. This builds on the model established by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1993), which significantly enhanced women's representation in local governance, where they now hold 44.4% of seats (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023).

Despite constitutional guarantees and decades of democratic practice, women have historically occupied a marginal space in India's legislative bodies, with women constituting only 14.94% of the Lok Sabha and approximately 14% in state assemblies as of 2024. These figures place India at 141st position globally according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking. Such structural underrepresentation stems from entrenched socio-cultural biases, limited party nominations, and resource gaps faced by women candidates. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, mandating a one-third reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures, aims to alter this status quo. Its passage signifies not only an institutional commitment to gender parity but also offers potential to boost female participation in electoral politics by nearly doubling their legislative share, thus reorienting policy discourse towards issues of gender justice and inclusive development.

Historical Context

Since India's independence, women's representation in legislatures has remained low despite constitutional provisions affirming equality (Articles 14, 15) and reservation for women in local bodies introduced through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993. Initially, women held only 5% of seats in the first Lok Sabha (1952). Women constituted only 4.4% of the electorate in 1952, the year of the first Lok Sabha election. There are 39 women in the Rajya Sabha and 74 in the Lok Sabha overall as of right now. Over decades, their share rose incrementally, reaching merely 14.94% in the 17th Lok Sabha (2019–2024). Statistical analyses using Election Commission data reveal stagnation in certain states and negligible increase in women's candidatures from major parties. Globally, India continues to lag behind countries like Rwanda (61% women MPs) and Nepal (33%). Landmark legal milestones include the 1993 Panchayati Raj amendments and multiple failed attempts at parliamentary reservation bills before the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. These trends demonstrate the need for structural reforms beyond tokenistic measures, as evidenced by statistical correlation between quotas and increased female legislative presence.

Political Representation of Women in India

Representation in Parliament: Since India's independence, the representation of women in Parliament has grown, albeit slowly. In the first Lok Sabha in 1952 women constituted only 4.41% of the lower house. By 2009, this figure had crossed 10%, and in 2019 it stood at 14.36%. The recently concluded 2024 elections saw 74 women MPs elected, with 43 of them serving as first-time parliamentarians. These women, with an average age of 50 are highly educated representing a shift towards more youth and dynamism in political participation.

State Legislative Assemblies: Representation in state assemblies, however, paints a less optimistic picture. States like Chhattisgarh (14.4%), West Bengal (13.7%), and Jharkhand (12.4%) lead but overall, the participation of women at the state level remains low.

Global Comparison: According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the global average of women in parliaments is 26.1%. India's performance is below par lagging behind more than 140 countries, including Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Despite incremental progress in the Lok Sabha India has substantial room to improve.

Provisions of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam amends Articles 239AA, 330A, 332A, and 334A of the Constitution to provide one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the Delhi Legislative Assembly. It mandates that the reserved seats will be determined by rotation and implemented after the next census and delimitation exercise. Significantly the reservation is proposed for fifteen years subject to further extension by Parliament. This legislative framework seeks to embed gender inclusivity in

India's representative institutions aligning constitutional ideals with the practical goal of amplifying women's voices in policymaking. The major provisions of the Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam are as follows:

- **Constitutional Amendment:** The Act introduces Articles 330A and 332A into the Constitution, drawing from the framework established for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes reservations. These new articles create a constitutional basis for reserving seats for women in legislative bodies, ensuring parity with existing affirmative action provisions.
- **One-Third Reservation:** The legislation mandates that one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies including those reserved for SCs and STs shall be reserved for women. This seeks to guarantee substantive female representation across both general and reserved categories.
- **Rotation Mechanism:** The Act provides for rotation of reserved seats among constituencies. This rotation will be determined by a delimitation exercise conducted on the basis of data from the first census held after the Act's enactment. The mechanism is designed to distribute the reservation equitably over time and geography.
- **Implementation Timeline:** The reservation framework will come into effect only after completion of the next census and subsequent delimitation process. Initially, the reservation is set for a period of fifteen years but Parliament retains the power to extend it further by legislative review, ensuring adaptability to future political and social conditions.
- **Administrative Challenges:** The reliance on census and delimitation data could lead to delays in implementation. The successful enactment of these provisions will require proactive institutional readiness coordination across multiple government agencies and timely execution of census and delimitation exercises.
- **Structural Shift:** This Act marks a significant structural transformation in India's democratic institutions. By extending the reservation framework from local bodies—where it was institutionalized through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993—to the national and state levels it fundamentally reconfigures the gender composition of legislative institutions aiming to bring India's representative democracy closer to constitutional ideals of gender equality.

Key features of the Act

- Reservation for Women in Lower House:

The Bill provided for inserting **Article 330A** to the constitution which borrows from the provisions of Article 330 which provides for reservation of seats to SCs/STs in the Lok Sabha.

The Bill provided that reserved seats for women may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in states or Union Territories.

In the seats reserved for SCs/STs the Bill sought to provide one-third of the seats to reserved for women on rotational basis.

- Reservation for Women in State Legislative Assemblies:

The Bill introduces **Article 332A** which mandates the reservation of seats for women in every state Legislative Assembly. Additionally, one-third of the seats reserved for SCs and STs must be allocated for women and one-third of the total seats filled through direct elections to the Legislative Assemblies shall also be reserved for women.

- Reservation for Women in NCT of Delhi (New clause in **239AA**):

Article **239AA** to the constitution grants special status to the Union Territory of Delhi as national capital with regards to its administrative and legislative functioning.

Article **239AA(2)(b)** was amended by the bill accordingly to add that the laws framed by parliament shall apply to the National Capital territory of Delhi.

- Commencement of Reservation (New article - **334A**):

The reservation will be effective after the census conducted after the commencement of this Bill has been published. Based on the census delimitation will be undertaken to reserve seats for women.

The reservation will be provided for a period of 15 years. However, it shall continue till such date as determined by a law made by Parliament.

- Rotation of Seats:

Seats reserved for women will be rotated after each delimitation as determined by a law made by Parliament.

Statistical Trends and Comparative Analysis

- **India's Current Landscape:** In the 18th Lok Sabha (2024), 74 women (13.6%) were elected slightly down from 14.4% in 2019. Women made up 9.6% of all contestants up from 7% in 2009. Female voter turnout (65.8%) surpassed male turnout in 19 states/UTs while women's candidacy remains just under 10% nationally. The women-to-men electorate ratio improved from 926:1000 (2019) to 946:1000 (2024). In 2024, women hold 13.6% of Lok Sabha seats (74 out of 543) and roughly 14% in state assemblies
- **Global Benchmarks:** India ranks 141st globally. Rwanda leads with 61.3% women MPs (constitutional quota since 2003). Nepal mandates 33% women MPs (achieved 32.8%). Nordic nations average 42–47% due to progressive party quotas.
- **Analytical Insights:** Correlation analysis shows constitutional gender quotas correlate with 20–25% higher women's representation. Regression models globally indicate reservation policies lead to significant increases in women's candidacies and election success rates.

Comparative Table:

Country	Female MPs (%)	Implementation Notes
India	13.6%	Quota legislation pending full enactment
Rwanda	61.3%	Constitutional mandate since 2003
Nepal	32.8%	Interim constitution, quota since 2008
Sweden	47%	Party quotas, strong gender institutions
Norway	41%	Progressive party frameworks
Global Avg	24.3%	Baseline for comparative reference

Potential Impacts on Policy and Governance

Increased women's representation can shift legislative agendas toward gender-sensitive policies on health, education and social welfare as studies globally show. Evidence from Panchayati Raj institutions demonstrates that women leaders prioritize public goods benefiting marginalized communities. Greater presence in Parliament can also catalyze reforms on gender-based violence laws, workplace equality and resource allocation. Yet, without strong enforcement and complementary capacity building there is a risk that quotas

become symbolic rather than transformative. Thus, vigilant monitoring and legal safeguards are crucial to ensuring genuine policy impact.

- **Shifts in Legislative Priorities:** Historical data and field studies show that increased women's representation often leads to greater focus on social welfare, education, and healthcare budgets. In India panchayat data shows women leaders invest 62% more in water and sanitation.
- **Gender-Sensitive Policymaking:** Women MPs globally and in India have been statistically more likely to raise issues related to gender-based violence, maternal health, and child welfare.
- **Present Scenario:** With only 13.6% women MPs in Lok Sabha gender priorities remain peripheral. The Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam could double this share potentially bringing policy frameworks in alignment with global trends where higher female representation corresponds with 25% more bills on social equity and inclusion.
- **Inclusive Democratic Practices:** Greater women's presence is strongly linked with more deliberative debate and responsiveness to marginalized communities as demonstrated by comparative analyses across 30 democracies.
- **Statistical Tools:** Regression and correlation analyses consistently show positive associations between quotas and increased funding for social sectors illustrating the likely shift India may experience post-implementation.

Key Advantages of the Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam

- Constitutional and Global Significance

The Adhiniyam marks the first major constitutional reform for women's political representation in independent India, aligning the country with over 63 nations that have legislated gender quotas. It strengthens India's democratic commitment to gender equality and could elevate its global ranking in women's parliamentary representation from 144th to the top 50.

- Dramatic Rise in Women's Legislative Presence

By mandating 33% reservation, the reform is projected to increase the number of women MPs in the Lok Sabha from 78 (14.4%) to 181, and women MLAs from ~500 to ~1,500. This will bring gender parity closer to reality in decision-making spaces across states and the Centre.

- Proven Development Impact from Grassroots Governance

Building on the 73rd Amendment, where women's reservation in panchayats has already led to measurable success—female sarpanches invest 62% more in drinking water and 44% more in education—the law is expected to replicate such development-oriented governance at higher legislative levels.

- Enhanced Socio-Economic and Health Outcomes

Constituencies led by women show significant improvements: 47% higher health and education spending, 34% lower infant mortality, and 28% higher girl child enrollment. Women's leadership also correlates with \$700 billion potential GDP gain by 2030 (McKinsey, 2023), reinforcing the economic rationale for inclusion.

- Better Governance, Reduced Corruption, and Policy Focus on Equity

States with higher female representation score 12 points better on corruption indices and demonstrate 23% higher fund efficiency. Women legislators also prioritize laws against gender violence, child marriage, and advance climate resilience and financial inclusion through better-targeted schemes.

- Democratic Deepening and Inspirational Value

The presence of women in legislatures catalyzes broader social change: girls in these constituencies are 25% more likely to aim for leadership roles. It also strengthens democratic legitimacy by ensuring that half the population is substantively represented, leading to more inclusive and participatory governance.

Major Disadvantages of the Nari Shakti Vandhan Adhiniyam

- Delayed and Costly Implementation

The law's rollout hinges on the census and delimitation, likely delaying implementation until at least 2029, risking political momentum loss and voter disillusionment. Meanwhile, estimated costs include ₹2,847 crores for delimitation and ₹450 crores for capacity building, potentially straining less developed states.

- Exclusion of OBC Women and Social Justice Concerns

The legislation lacks provisions for OBC women, who constitute 41% of India's population, raising equity concerns and risking reinforcement of caste hierarchies. This gap fails to address intersectional discrimination and deepens intra-reservation inequalities.

- Proxy Representation and Structural Barriers

Experiences from panchayats show risks of male relatives controlling reserved seats; 42% of women candidates report family pressure in decision-making. Additionally, political parties continue to offer women only 11% of tickets, and women hold just 12% of party leadership roles.

- Rotational and Electoral Challenges

The mandated rotation of reserved constituencies every 10 years may disrupt ongoing projects, reduce accountability, and confuse voters. This could stall local development and undermine voter-representative relationships.

- Cultural Resistance and Social Barriers

Deep-seated biases persist: 37% of rural voters prefer male representatives, while northern states show 23% higher resistance to women leaders. Media bias compounds this, with women receiving 56% less policy-focused coverage and 67% more coverage on personal matters.

- Structural Limitations and Long-term Risks

The policy risks creating long-term dependence on quotas, fueling debates about merit versus reservation. Meanwhile, the law does little to address campaign funding gaps (women spend 67% less) or build capacity, with women receiving 45% fewer party resources for training and mentorship.

Comparative Global Analysis

Success Benchmarks from Other Countries

Country	Quota System	Women MPs %	Implementation Period	Key Outcomes
Rwanda	30% constitutional	64%	5 years (2003-2008)	Land rights, GBV laws, economic growth +3.2%
Sweden	Voluntary party quotas	45%	Gradual over 20 years	Innovation leadership, workplace equality
France	50% candidate requirement	36%	8 years (2000-2008)	Increased women entrepreneurs +28%
Argentina	30% legislative quota	42%	6 years implementation	Social security reforms, education investment
India	33% constitutional	Projected 33%	6+ years (2029+)	Potential GDP +2.1%, healthcare focus

Legislative Milestone Comparison

Constitutional Provisions for Women empowerment

- **Part III-** It guarantees the fundamental rights for both men and women.
- **DPSP-** It ensure economic empowerment by providing for equal pay for equal work by both men and women humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
- Right to contest election- Any Indian citizen who is registered as a voter and is over 25 can contest elections to the Lok Sabha or the SLAs; for Rajya Sabha the minimum age is 30.
- Article **243 D-** Provides for reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women in Panchayats.
- Article **243 T-** Provides for reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women in Urban Local Bodies.
- Article **325-** No person to be ineligible for inclusion in or to claim to be included in a special electoral roll on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex.
- **Article 326-** The elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assembly of every State shall be on the basis of adult suffrage

India's Gender Equality Legislation Timeline:

1. **Hindu Succession Act (1956)** - Property rights for women
2. **Equal Remuneration Act (1976)** - Equal pay legislation
3. **73rd Amendment (1992)** - Panchayati Raj women's reservation (33%)
4. **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005)**
5. **Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act (2013)**
6. **Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam (2023)** - Parliamentary reservation

Current Baseline (2023)

- **Lok Sabha:** 78 women MPs out of 543 (14.4%)
- **Rajya Sabha:** 31 women MPs out of 245 (13%)
- **State Assemblies:** ~500 women MLAs out of 4,120 (~12%)
- **Global Rank:** 144th in women's parliamentary representation

Post-Implementation Projections (2029+)

- **Lok Sabha:** 181 women MPs (33% of 543 seats)
- **State Assemblies:** ~1,360 women MLAs (33% of 4,120 seats)
- **Global Rank:** Projected to reach **top 50** worldwide
- **Economic Impact:** Potential **\$700 billion GDP addition** by 2030

Challenges and Critiques

Despite promising legislative changes multiple structural and cultural obstacles continue to impede women's full participation in Indian politics. Parties often relegate women to unwinnable seats reflecting entrenched patriarchal attitudes that question women's leadership capabilities. Even where legal frameworks exist, they are often undermined by lack of enforcement, weak intra-party democracy and minimal institutional support. Gendered media scrutiny, threats of violence and insufficient financial backing further limit women's effectiveness as political actors. These challenges underscore that legislation alone cannot dismantle deep-seated barriers without parallel efforts in party reform, capacity building and social transformation.

Some major challenges are as follows:

- **Restricted Access to Winnable Seats:** Women continue to be sidelined when it comes to strong, competitive constituencies. Data from 2024 indicates that less than 10% of such seats are offered to women candidates with the 2019 Lok Sabha elections showing a pattern of female candidates being fielded predominantly in constituencies historically held by opposition parties (ADR, 2024).
- **Prevalence of Harassment and Threats:** A significant proportion of women candidates—over 60%—report experiencing harassment which includes online abuse, physical intimidation, and threats to personal safety. This pattern has been particularly visible in states such as West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh (CSDS, 2023).
- **Patriarchal Party Hierarchies:** Party leadership structures remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. In 2022 the executive committees of major national parties included fewer than 15% women effectively excluding them from meaningful participation in decision-making processes.
- **Centralized Candidate Selection:** Political parties continue to centralize candidate selection processes often ignoring grassroots women leaders. Studies show that over 80% of ticket decisions are made by central committees dominated by men further marginalizing women's agency in the electoral process.
- **Financial Resource Disparities:** Campaign financing remains skewed in favor of male candidates who spent 25–30% more than their female counterparts in the 2019 elections. This disparity hampers women's ability to mobilize competitive campaigns.
- **Domestic and Familial Pressures:** Women candidates often face intense familial and societal pressure to prioritize domestic roles over political careers. This is reflected in lower rates of re-nomination and retention of women incumbents in legislative bodies.
- **Census-Linked Delays:** Past experience with local body quota expansions following the 73rd and 74th Amendments demonstrates how delays in census and delimitation exercises can hinder timely implementation of women's reservations (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021).
- **Weak Enforcement in Local Bodies:** Even in local governments enforcement gaps remain. Reports from states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh highlight vacancies persisting in seats reserved for women due to administrative inaction or delayed processes.
- **Political Stalling:** The legislative journey of women's reservation has been fraught with repeated stalling. Earlier attempts in 1996, 1998, and 2008 failed to yield enactment until the passage of the Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam in 2023.

- **Insufficient Capacity Building:** Evidence suggests states that actively invest in training programs—such as Kerala—have greater success in sustaining women's leadership pointing to a significant gap in capacity building elsewhere (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).
- **Cultural Stereotypes and Bias:** Surveys consistently reveal deep-seated gender bias among the electorate. Nearly 70% of voters perceive women as less capable in managing critical portfolios such as defence or the economy (CSDS, 2022).
- **Gendered Media Narratives:** Media coverage often focuses on the personal lives and appearance of female candidates rather than their policies or professional capabilities as seen notably in the 2020 Delhi elections.
- **Lack of Mentorship and Support:** The scarcity of female mentors remains stark, with less than 5% of senior advisors or party mentors being women (ADR, 2022). This deprives aspiring female politicians of crucial guidance and institutional support structures.
- **Funding Disparities:** Internal assessments from major political parties in 2021 reveal a stark gender gap in campaign funding allocation. Women candidates consistently receive substantially less central party financial support compared to their male counterparts undermining their ability to mount effective electoral campaigns and build long-term political capital.
- **Violence Against Women in Politics:** Persistent incidents of targeted violence against women leaders continue to plague India's political landscape. Notably, reports from Rajasthan and Haryana document threats, intimidation, and physical attacks on female sarpanches, underscoring the entrenched resistance to women exercising authority in public and political spaces.

Recommendations and Roadmap

To translate policy into real progress India must pair constitutional provisions with robust implementation mechanisms. Immediate steps should include fast-tracking census and delimitation processes to operationalize quotas strengthening legal safeguards against violence and discrimination, and mandating intra-party reforms that ensure at least one-third women in leadership roles. Investment in training programs and equitable campaign funding is essential as global evidence shows that capacity building and resource parity significantly improve women's electoral success. A credible monitoring framework coupled with public awareness campaigns will further consolidate gains and embed gender justice in India's democratic fabric.

- **Immediate Implementation Measures:** Government must prioritize completion of the next census and delimitation process to activate reservations; delaying risks political stalling similar to past quota bills (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021).
- **Capacity Building:** Allocate dedicated funding to train women leaders in legislative procedures, media communication, and constituency management. Kerala's model where trained women leaders achieved a 40% higher policy success rate offers a blueprint.
- **Intra-Party Reforms:** Mandate at least 33% women in party decision-making bodies; parties with higher internal gender representation have shown 20–25% more women candidates fielded nationally (ADR, 2022).
- **Transparent Funding Mechanisms:** Create statutory guidelines ensuring equitable distribution of party funds to women candidates, monitored by the Election Commission.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish independent bodies at state and national levels to review progress annually, publish data and recommend policy corrections; international examples from Rwanda show such oversight doubled women's parliamentary presence within a decade.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Counter cultural stigma by running mass media campaigns promoting women's leadership based on success stories from local governments.

- **Legal Safeguards:** Enact stricter laws to prevent violence against women in politics drawing from best practices in countries like Nepal and Nordic nations.
- **Strengthening Legal Frameworks:** The government should amend the Representation of the People Act, 1951 to include explicit penalties for parties that fail to comply with reservation provisions, and pass complementary rules under the Conduct of Election Rules to ensure fair allocation of reserved seats.
- **National Commission Oversight:** Expand powers of the National Commission for Women to investigate cases of violence or discrimination against women candidates, with authority to recommend disqualification of candidates involved in such offences.
- **Government Schemes:** Launch targeted schemes similar to the Mahila Shakti Kendra initiative, focusing on supporting elected women representatives with infrastructure grants, digital literacy, and security measures.
- **Parliamentary Committees:** Create a permanent Parliamentary Standing Committee on Women's Political Empowerment to review progress, suggest legal amendments, and scrutinize government action on implementing reservations.

Conclusion

This study has examined the historical context current statistical trends challenges and potential of the Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam to transform India's democratic landscape. While India has made incremental gains in women's political representation significant structural, cultural and institutional barriers remain. Drawing lessons from global best practices and domestic success stories this paper underscores that reservation alone is not enough. Effective implementation, legal safeguards, intra-party reforms, capacity building, and continuous monitoring are essential. The Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam thus presents a historic opportunity to deepen India's democracy and advance gender justice—if backed by strong political will, robust legal frameworks and sustained societal change.

In conclusion the journey toward equitable gender representation in India's political sphere demands not just policy proclamations but enduring commitment and accountability at every level of governance. The Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam offers a pivotal chance to bridge the gender gap in legislative spaces. Its success will hinge on translating legislative intent into transformative action—empowering women to not only occupy seats but to shape the nation's democratic and developmental priorities in the decades to come.

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