

The Good News from Kabul

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, September 28, 2005

September 18, Afghan citizens cast ballots for national and provincial representatives for the first time in 36 years. But the news was almost crowded out by German election confusion and the chaos of Katrina and Rita.

Watching late night TV at the Kabul Inn, I was disappointed that the precious few Afghan election stories led with the fact that the day ended with less violence than expected. My behind-the-scenes view was quite different—inspiring, really, as millions headed out to vote for 5,805 candidates competing for hundreds of positions.

Sure, safety was on everyone's mind. "How's the security situation?" I asked my interpreter, as we drove to a polling station. "Oh, fine," he replied. "Just three rocket shells." The U.S. embassy calls Afghanistan one of the most dangerous missions in the world. Eight candidates were killed in the run up to the election, and many women dropped out of the campaign because of intimidation. But voting day scenes were striking in their simplicity. On dusty streets, loud speakers spewed tinny patriotic songs and a booming voice urged Afghans to vote. Inside heavily guarded polling stations, cardboard booths provided privacy as voters, some wearing long blue burkas, flipped through pages with endless lists of candidates designated by name, photograph, and—for the illiterate—a symbol such as three camels or two cell phones. A woman in black stood in front of a large white plastic tub, that looked to all the world like an ice cooler at a picnic. But there was a slit in the lid for ballots. She grinned broadly as my escort told me she was the first woman to show her face publicly when the Taliban fled.

The day came off with hardly a glitch as men and women lined up to dip their fingers in purple ink to prevent double voting. Like Catholics with ash crosses on their foreheads, Afghans seemed proud to show strangers the telltale sign.

Granted, all was not well. Politically, voting was stained by candidates with histories soaked in blood. Post-conflict situations are generally rife with corruption, as warriors become heads of black market syndicates. Afghanistan's no exception, with the cultivation of opium soaring. Warlords haven't been brought to justice, and political legitimacy will increase their strength.

That's the bad news from Kabul. But there's good news too.

When Masuda Jalal ran for president two years ago, she declared, “I broke tradition. If I don’t become president, the girls of this country will.” It’s a credible claim. One polling station I visited was in an all girls’ school, where 10,000 students come each day in shifts. Only five years ago, it was a Taliban madras providing extremist religious training for boys. With a constitution requiring that 25% of legislators be women, Afghanistan has taken a step toward “inclusive security.”

Inclusion costs. Election day, I met with several women candidates. One was a basketball star. Another a grassroots organizer. A third a television journalist. But I was especially impressed by Soraya Ebadi, an attractive woman in her late 30s, with short, henna-red hair. When she was widowed at 19, she was already the mother of four. Despite, or because of, her hardships, a couple of years ago she played a pivotal role at a conference in Kandahar (the heartland of the Taliban) where a women’s bill of rights was drafted. Now, after devoting herself to creating schools for women and handicapped children, she’s outraged by claims on TV that she campaigned past the deadline. She says her reputation was besmirched by a reporter who groused, privately, “Women want to run this country.” “Not so,” she countered, “but we want our rightful place.”

Ms. Ebadi isn’t alone in her passionate patriotism or her belief in women’s abilities to make a difference. Scores of Afghans never mentioned to me the violence that preoccupies Western press. Instead, they stressed their hope for a transformed homeland. Part of that transformation is the robust presence of women governing the country. One man said to me he didn’t know who the thousands of candidates were, but he was going to vote for women because they weren’t the ones behind the guns.

That hope in women was a common sentiment, not only among voters, but UN officials too. They realize a new cast of characters will help bring stability to this war-racked country. So, as the day drew to a close, election monitors breathed sighs of relief, and women took a deep breath. They knew their work had just begun.