

Building Democracy

Ten million Afghans—
41% of them women—
register to vote

Ghazni, Afghanistan

The pink and blue election poster shows women casting their ballots. Some wear headscarves, some have the full burka covering their faces. One woman has a crutch, reminding us of the many Afghan land mine victims. The poster is plastered on the ancient-looking mud wall of a building in Tormay Village, perched on a hillside overlooking lush fields of tomatoes, potatoes, apples, corn, and other crops.

The village way of life seems reassuringly traditional and ancient, with boys and girls leading their sheep and cows along worn dirt paths between the fields. But the poster gives one an inkling of the huge changes coming to this ancient land.

Already Afghans have sent representatives to two Loya Jirgas—councils that decided on the interim government and then adopted a constitution and set elections for president on October 9 this year and for parliament in 2005.

In Tormay, Jalalabad and across this Texas-sized country, candidates have formed 20 political parties and are joining coalitions and preparing posters and radio advertisements. For people who lived under a monarchy and then communism and finally a medieval theocracy that stoned people to death for religious crimes, this is a new era.

“A lot of people argued the people were not ready for elections—they were proved wrong so far,” said U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad.

Although the Taliban threatened to kill anyone who registers to vote, with the help of USAID, the United Nations, and other aid groups, over 10.5 million Afghans registered to vote—more than the original estimate of 9.8 million eligible voters.

What’s more, in a land where only three years earlier the Taliban barred women from even leaving their houses unless accompanied by a male relative, 41 percent of those who registered were women.

“The participation is amazing,” said David Singh, spokesman for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. “There was a lot of skepticism about this process at the beginning, but the targets have been fulfilled.”

Jawad Ludin, the spokesman for President Hamid Karzai, was equally elated.

“We are overwhelmed with joy at the sheer enthusiasm of the people,” Ludin said.

A poll by the Asia Foundation released July 13 reported that 64 percent of Afghans think their country is heading in the right direction, with only 11 percent saying it’s going in the wrong direction. Some 81 percent said they plan to vote and 77 percent said they thought the elections would “make a difference.” The survey, carried out under a USAID grant, was conducted in 29 of 32 provinces containing 94 percent of the Afghan people. It showed 91 percent of Afghans were aware of the elections and wished to participate.



Women delegates at a Loya Jirga listen to King Zahir Shah.

The voter registration cards proved of value to the Afghans as their first and only identity card. Although some Afghans had registered more than once, voters will have to dip a finger in indelible ink that will take days to wear off, preventing them from voting a second time.

“The goal of the coalition is a country that stands on its own feet... that no longer hosts international terrorists focused on the destruction of the world as we know it,” said Khalilzad at a conference at Bagram air base near Kabul.

“We want to get Afghans working for themselves by standing up a government working for the wishes of its people. We’re not seeking to have them copy the U.S. system, but people here want a voice in the selection of their government.”

In June 2002, an Emergency Loya Jirga established the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan. A second Loya Jirga adopted a new constitution establishing an Islamic Republic in January, 2004. Former King Zahir Shah holds the honorific title, “Father of the Country,” but lacks any governing authority. The government will consist of an elected president, two vice presidents, and a nation-

“We have never had elections but we know that other people have them and we want to decide who will rule us.”

Afghan farmer outside Jalalabad



Election poster plastered on Kabul building shows women with headscarves

and veiled burkas voting for the first time. Pashtu inscription says “Dear women,

please vote. Your vote counts.”

Tokyo Donors Conference

\$2 billion pledged for reconstruction

ISAF force arrives

Child vaccination program begins

Karzai signs Declaration of Essential Rights of Afghan Women

USAID Mission reopens

Security Council adopts sanctions against al Qaeda, Taliban

U.S. pledges additional \$296 million to Afghan reconstruction

Peshawar Voluntary Repatriation Center opens

First units of new Afghan Army start training



Larry Sample/USAID

al assembly consisting of two houses: the House of People (Wolesi Jirga), and the House of Elders (Meshrano Jirga). There will also be an independent judiciary.

Extending the Government's Reach

With the routing of the Taliban, a key remaining challenge was the need to extend the reach of the national government to the provincial and district levels, particularly in areas controlled by strong regional leaders who defeated the Soviets and the Taliban.

The interim government led by Hamid Karzai—with U.S. and international support—has urged these regional leaders to demobilize their private militias and turn in their weapons, to allow their forces to be replaced by the Afghan National Army (see page 18), and to wind down their roles as military commanders and to become civil or political leaders instead.

As Ambassador Khalilzad has said, “We are breaking the back of the problem of warlordism.” Regional leaders increasingly are accepting the extension of the authority of the national government, as Karzai has appointed new provincial governors, police chiefs, and corps and division commanders.

More and more, differences among key leaders and factions are being channeled into political processes, rather than military

competitions or clashes. Even those who support regional leaders are calling on Afghans to work out the appropriate distribution of power and responsibilities in the national government through the future parliament and constitutional means.

Radio Key to Political Awakening

Since 85 percent of Afghans cannot read and many live in remote regions without the opportunity or the cash to buy newspapers and magazines, radio has become the key to informing citizens about building democracy. Dozens of new radio stations have taken to the airwaves, supported by grants and training programs from USAID, the European Union, United Nations, and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

AİNA is one of these NGOs. Backed by U.S., French, Finnish, Japanese, and other aid programs, it produces newspapers, magazines and radio news programs which it distributes around the country.

AİNA, in collaboration with UNESCO and the Women Publishing Group, started the first community radio programming for Afghan Women in March 2003, and in a few months was broadcasting four hours per day in both Dari and Pashto, the major languages of the country.

Azizullah, 30, is the editor of another

Results

- In June, 2002, a Loya Jirga created a Transitional Islamic State headed by interim President Hamid Karzai.
- The first presidential elections in Afghan history set for this October, parliamentary elections follow in 2005.
- Twenty parties register and 18 candidates enter presidential race.
- 10 million Afghans register to vote despite attempts by Taliban and other groups to disrupt the process.
- 41% of those registered are women; under the Taliban few were allowed to work or leave home let alone vote.
- In January 2004, another Loya Jirga adopts a constitution creating an Islamic republic.
- Newspapers and radio reopen; debate and free media emerge.

AİNA product: a glossy bimonthly children's magazine called *Parwak* which means “flying.” It reaches 500,000 children. Articles aim to subtly teach Afghan children to respect those who are different from them—not to hate them as the Taliban did. “One article tells how bubble gum is used by children around the world,” Azizullah said. “Indirectly, Afghan kids learn that there are kids in America and elsewhere who like gum.”

The Islamic clergy nearly banned the magazine for an article about a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jewish child who are all friends. However, Azizullah said when he explained the intent of the story, the clerics dropped their opposition.

“My idea is that the magazine goes through the children to the family,” Azizullah said. “In most of Afghanistan, the children can read, not the parents.”

In another Kabul house, the first Afghan news service—*Pashwak*—was training reporters and preparing to distribute its reports to radio stations, newspapers and other customers. The reports are being copied onto CDs and an NGO delivers them around the country to 50 radio stations. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting, an international NGO, trained the *Pashwak* staff, headed by news editor Abdul Rauf Liwal.

“This is important because we are part of the first democratic election in the entire Afghan history,” said Liwal as reporters stood in line to have him edit their copy. “After 23 years we are going towards peace.”

“We also have the role of bringing what the people want to the government and what the government is doing to the people. The people endured such horrendous times in the Taliban era. They are thirsty for this openness. It's like taking birds out of a cage.

“This is the first time in this country's history we can write and say what we want.”

March '02

Schools reopen

USAID delivers
10.6 million textbooksGood Neighbours
Pact signed

April '02

King Zahir Shah returns
to AfghanistanPakistan's President
Musharraf visits, pledges
cooperation