

CIVIC EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

DISPELLING SUSPICION — FACE-TO-FACE

by Barbara Reinhardus



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In the aftermath of the conflict in Afghanistan, IFES and the United Nations Electoral Unit developed an initiative to introduce Afghan voters to democracy, voter registration and elections through country-wide civic education workshops. The program's underlying theme is that by participating in the democratic process, Afghans can begin to move their nation from a past of war and destruction to a future of peace and stability. The United Nations (UN), IFES and a network of other NGOs are sharing responsibility for this outreach project.

Workshop content was designed to follow the “road map” outlined in the Bonn Agreement. The trainer takes the participants through the important stages of post-war development, including the Emergency Loya Jirga, to electing a transitional government, the drafting and ratification of the new constitution, voter registration and, ultimately, general elections.

The groups are small (25 participants), the approach is participatory and the objective is to teach basic concepts and encourage participants to carry the messages to their families and friends. The workshop materials are fairly basic and include large training flip charts, posters, pamphlets and banners. There is much face-to-face contact in the workshops and community meetings. The participants have included government employees, mullahs, journalists, women's groups, community leaders and police.

Kabul has, by far, the largest population of the eight centers, and IFES is the lead organization for face-to-face activities in Kabul. As of January 2004, IFES had organized 869 workshops over 10 weeks with almost 23,000 participants, of which more than 30% were women. IFES' goal in 2004 is to extend that reach in Kabul and outlying areas. A UN civic education team, working closely with IFES, focuses more on community meetings with local leaders. In the seven other centers, a similar collaboration is taking place between the UN and other NGOs.

The workshops represent only a part of the entire civic education initiative. A mass media program was designed

by the UN (with input from IFES) and is being funded by a variety of international donors. Broadcasting of messages, announcements, interviews and skits on all national and regional stations began in early December 2003.

The civic education program preceded voter registration by several weeks in the eight centers. The voter registration strategy includes three phases, originally designated by the UN. The first phase started in December 2003 in the eight largest cities in Afghanistan. During phases two and three, voter registration will move to the other 24 provincial capitals and then to the Afghan countryside.



Civic education team in Kabul.

The complexity of the Afghan society precludes traditional approaches to civic education. There are different ethnic groups and tribes within these groups and conflict among many. Afghans are very suspicious of several components of democracy, especially political parties. They see this as a breakdown of how they traditionally organize their societies. Moreover, the more conservative members of Afghan society express reservations about democracy and the participation of women. To them, democracy means the introduction of liberal ideas that are contradictory to the principles of Islam and the norms of Afghani traditional culture.

Since the views of religious, tribal and community leaders carry enormous weight, an important part of the civic education strategy is to meet with Afghan leadership at every level and in every part of the country to consult, educate and encourage discussion of democratic ideals enshrined in the constitution. IFES has begun this process in Kabul and in the following months will continue the outreach in rural areas.

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In Kabul, IFES found that the majority of participants were very open to discussing the concepts of democracy and good governance. During the days leading up to the Constitutional Loyal Jirga, interest in the debate on the constitution was very high, in particular about the structure of government and the role of Islam.

An interesting example of what this civic education initiative unearths occurred at IFES' first workshop, held at the Ministry of Women's Affairs. During the democracy presentation, the participants sat in absolute silence. The last page of the flip chart showed a drawing of a family compound, ten years in the future. It pictured the family sitting in the garden of their home with the war damage to the building now repaired. The children are talking to their parents and their school bags are lying on the grass beside them. And most significantly, the door of the compound is open, indicating a sense of peace and security. As the trainer pointed out the various images on the page, women in the audience started to weep.

When designing the civic education materials, the IFES/UN team attempted to develop posters, brochures and flip chart illustrations which are inspirational and educational but do not offend Islamic sensibilities but we have taken liberties. Our drawings usually show some women dressed in "burkas," holding registration cards with a blank space where the photo should be. Most of the women pictured have only their hair covered, not their faces, and they represent all ethnic groups including the nomads who dress in beautiful and bright colors.

As we move our civic education program away from the urban centers and into the more conservative and rural parts of Afghanistan our task will become increasingly challenging. Gaining access to the citizens of these communities, for any reason, is always difficult and our progress may be stopped by elders or militia commanders who see our presence and our information as threatening. [4]

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AFGHAN ELECTORAL COMMISSIONERS OBSERVE MAURITIAN ELECTIONS

IFES led a team of Afghan election commissioners to Mauritius to observe the by-elections. These were the first elections the Afghan commissioners had ever witnessed. After their trip, they had the following comments on their own country's elections, tentatively scheduled for July 2004.

"This is a great challenge. For the very first time in the history of Afghanistan we have the opportunity to organize democratic elections. But it will not be easy."

- Zahida Ansary



National Election Commissioner Gothai KHAWRAI receives computer training at the IAEC Headquarters by IFES' Reshad Rahmani.

"After almost three decades of war and civil strife, our work cannot be seen in isolation. The disarmament process must also be successful in order for us to succeed."

- Qutbuddin QAEYM



Interpreter Ghulam Sakhi EHSANI (left) and election commissioners Mohammad Faqir Bahram (2nd to left) and Qutbuddin Qaeym (right) met with President of the Republic of Mauritius, The Rt. Hon. Sir Anerood JUGNAUTH, G.C.S.K., K.C.M.G., Q.C. (2nd to right) during their by-election study tour.

"To achieve a representative government in Afghanistan, we have to work together as a whole nation, one in which women are an essential part of society. As an Election Commission, we are trying to do just that."

- Chairman Zakim Shah