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Credible elections critical for stability

Interview with the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ján Kubiš

Q. Afghanistan's presidential elections are scheduled to take place in April 2014. What needs to be done to ensure that the elections will be fair and inclusive and lead to results that would be acceptable for a majority of the population?

Ján Kubiš: First of all, we all must acknowledge and understand that these elections are Afghan-led and Afghan-managed. There is no and there will be no foreign interference, and we are taking very seriously the statements of the authorities that there will be no internal interference. We [UNAMA] have been called upon to provide support and we have also been asked to provide technical assistance. We have been asked to continue with capacity building, notably, of the Independent Election Commission and other institutions that are active in the area of elections.

No doubt, not necessarily the United Nations, but the international community will be asked to provide financial support and eventually, I assume, that ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] will be called upon to help with certain logistical and, perhaps, security support as far as the election is concerned.

What is very important for us



The UN Special Representative and head of UNAMA, Ján Kubiš. (Photo: Fardin Waezi)

– as UNAMA and UNDP Elect [UN Development Programme Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow, a vehicle through which the international community supports Afghan electoral authorities to plan and conduct elections] – is to bring into the political discourse, to the attention of the authorities and institutions, including the Parliament [the Wolesi Jirga and the Mashrano Jirga], the best practices based on basic principles that should underpin any good quality election.

The people of Afghanistan would like to have better elections than previous ones. The previous one was criticized, and we, the UN, were criticized, for being part of the problem, and

not always the solution. So this time we should not be part of the problem. We should be part of the solution, while respecting the lead role of Afghanistan. We can help by bringing to the attention, for example, any proposals which may not necessarily be in line with the basic principles of independent institutions, or for having a functioning electoral adjudication mechanism for fraud mitigation and prevention measures.

We will not only provide direct expert assistance and advice. We will also speak out about principles and best practices, and we will try to influence the thinking in a positive way – this is not interference, but influence – of those that are taking decisions. This approach will help increase

trust and belief among the people so that they can see that it is worthwhile and necessary to take part in the election. Only with this broad participation in the election can you get the necessary degree of legitimacy for the new team that will come.

Q. How important is this election for the future of Afghanistan?

Ján Kubiš: It is crucial. It is the end of one stage of the development of Afghanistan, and the beginning of a new phase of the development of Afghanistan. The previous stage was very much under the influence of ongoing military operations, the engagement of ISAF and foreign military forces

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Changing perceptions through film



Interview with Somaiya Ramish

“In a city where men don’t have a cinema to watch films, the fact that women gather to watch film is a big civil movement.”

Somaiya Ramish is the head of *Bunyad-e-Madani Naw Andeshan* (New Thinkers’ Foundation) and the director of the Shahrssa radio station in Herat, the capital city of the western Afghan province of the same name. She is well-known in the province’s literary scene, with two books published, one a book of her own poetry, *‘Barai Khudam’* (For Myself), and the other, *‘Dar Prantez’* (Within the Bracket), a collection of interviews with prominent civil society leaders in Herat.

She has also produced a short film, which won the third prize in an international film festival organized in Herat last year. The arts, particularly cinema, is something close to her heart. The institute she heads, the New Thinkers’ Foundation, has established an informal women’s cinema viewing and discussion group. Over the past year, a number of women have gathered at the Foundation’s premises every Thursday to watch and discuss films.

UNAMA recently spoke with Mrs. Ramish about her activities.

Q: What triggered the idea of a women’s cinema viewing and discussion group in Herat?

Somaiya Ramish: We are living in a city which does not have a cinema theatre, despite the fact that cinema has become a part of daily, regular life. So, we had the idea of gathering women together

to watch films – and, so far, the idea has been successful. At least 10 to 15 women and girls take part in each gathering. We watch the film together and then discuss the main ideas from the film. We get to know today’s modern cinema, its famous directors and producers and their production styles and techniques. This helps us increase our awareness on cinema and filmmaking in general.

Q: How has this initiative changed women’s perceptions towards their roles in society?

Somaiya Ramish: This is a very basic intervention and we cannot see its impact quickly. In a city where men don’t have a cinema theatre to watch films, the fact that women gather to watch film is a big civil movement. During the past year, we have watched at least 50 films and these include films that won the Oscar awards or were nominated for Oscars. We created a connection between the women of our city and those internationally famous films, which undoubtedly has had an impact on some level. But we hope to witness a more practical, visible impact in the future.

Q: What kind of films do you choose to watch in the women gathering?

Somaiya Ramish: We don’t discriminate in the selection of films. Our priority is to watch famous movies from

Afghanistan and from around the globe. If a film is produced in Afghanistan and we recognize it as a great piece of art, we will certainly screen that film. We have screened some good documentaries that have been produced in Afghanistan, or about Afghanistan, and some short Afghan films that were nominated for Oscar awards. However, most of the films we choose are on topics related to women, or its main characters were famous women, or they were directed by women.

Q: If you choose to watch an English-language film, how does the audience follow what’s being said?

Somaiya Ramish: Some of the women understand English, but we try to ensure that the films have subtitles in Farsi [Dari] so that it is easy for everyone attending to understand the dialogue.

Q: Do you think women in Herat are playing their due role in the society?

Somaiya Ramish: Despite the fact that Herat has a religious and conservative society, women have made significant progress and today we have prominent women in all walks of life, including in cultural, social, art and literature fields. Having lived under immense social restrictions, the women in Herat have not only moved ahead but also paved the way for future generation of women to play their significant

role in society.

Q: From your perspective as a writer and a poet, how important do you think is the role of women in Afghanistan’s peace process?

Somaiya Ramish: There is a notion that has been repeated again and again: that women are half of society. [Just like men] women need peace, and they can play a crucial role in the country’s peace process. They can play a direct role on the High Peace Council, and, indirectly, women can guide men at the family level: they can encourage their husbands, brothers and children to support the peace process.

Q: In your opinion, do women think differently to men?

Somaiya Ramish: Just as men and women are different physically, they also think differently. The difference in their thinking is real – but it does not mean that women’s thoughts are somehow better than men, or that men’s thoughts are somehow better than women. It is simply different. And the difference should be taken into consideration in all matters of life.

Q: What is your message to Afghan society regarding women’s empowerment?

Somaiya Ramish: My message is very simple: people should forget discrimination against women and allow men and women to live their lives equally. ■

New film focuses on child marriage issue

A new animation produced by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) will highlight the traumatic experiences of young girls forcefully entered into child marriage.

‘Teacher Malalai’s Adventures: Zarmina’s Early Marriage’ will help demonstrate the health and psychological consequences of children being married and “portray how child marriage denies the rights of a girl,” says Dr. Nigina Abaszada, a gender expert serving with the UNFPA in Kabul.

According to the latest survey by Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (AMICS) for 2010/2011, a staggering 46 per cent of Afghan girls are married before they are 18 and over 15 per cent before they even turn 15. AMICS says Afghanistan continues to have one of the world’s highest rates of child marriage. In

line with the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN recommends that the age of marriage is set at 18 years, with child marriage defined as a formal marriage or informal union before age 18.

Afghanistan’s major television outlets will soon start broadcasting the seven-minute animated film which is produced by UNFPA in cooperation with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

Given the fact that radio is the mass medium best able to reach the biggest number of Afghans a radio version of the film will also be produced for broadcast on a variety of Afghan radio stations.

The film tells the story of the young 14 year old Zarmina who is taken away from school by her father so that she can be married off. The animation portrays Zarmina’s older sister, Soniya – also married to a man while under age – giving birth to a dead baby in the hospital. A doctor tells the father that he has lost his grandchild because Soniya was much too young and physically unable to give birth. Only then does the father realize the harmful consequences of child marriage and decides to drop the idea of having Zarmina marry. The story ends when the father sends Zarmina back to school.

“Many issues related to early marriage are inter-connected and we wanted to explain this vicious circle through a simple but concise and comprehensive story of the tragic consequences of child

marriage for one family,” Dr. Abaszada said about the film.

According to AMICS which carried out its research through the Central Statistics Organisation with the support from UNICEF, early marriage in Afghanistan is strongly correlated to education, with young uneducated women being more than three times as likely to be married before the age of 18 in comparison to those with secondary or higher education. The results of the same study indicate that only over 22 per cent of Afghan women are able to read and write.

“It is important to remind everyone that early marriage denies a girl of childhood, disrupts her education, and significantly increases the risk for child delivery complications and exposure to domestic violence and abuse,” Dr. Abaszada said. ■

UNAMA’s International Women’s Day



At a 28 March 2013 ceremony in Kabul, organized to mark the International Women’s Day, UNAMA honoured 10 Afghan women pioneers in their respective fields. The colourful event also saw performances by renowned singers and an acrobatic group ‘FACE OFF’. Detailed report on page 8. (Photos: Fardin Waezi)