

# Bad Weather & Bravery in Kabul

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Three years after the fall of the Taliban regime the Afghan people – including Afghan women – voted in the presidential elections. One of the presidential candidates was a woman. The first Afghan who voted was a 19-year old woman. The elections and the symbolic emancipation of Afghan women are important, but for most Afghan women patriarchal oppression and violence is part of everyday life.



Saturday the 9th of October was the first real autumn day

in Kabul. The evening before the cold and dusty autumn storms had begun. Kabul is never a beautiful city, and this Saturday it was worse. Kabul wears the signs of two decades of war. Large parts of the city have not been restored since the fall of the Taliban regime in the end of 2001. Kabul also wears the signs of the new war, the war against terror(ism). Afghan ministries, foreign embassies, US-dominated security companies etc. have become well-guarded prisons for their employees and inhabitants (the post-war design trend includes high walls, barbed wire fences and big men with guns).

On Saturday Kabul, however, also showed another side. It was Election Day.

Over ten million Afghans in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran had registered to vote. (Some, especially women, had registered several times, as they expected to get some food benefits from the registration process). The discussions foregoing the elections focused on potential fraud, threats of violence and constant security alerts. The discussions after the elections concerned whether the elections had been fairly democratic and to what extent fraud would impact on the election results. Security was not an issue as the Election Day was, as somebody said, "... probably the most peaceful day in Afghan history".

In Western countries the emancipation of Afghan women from the signs of Taliban oppression has to a large extent symbolized the nascent democracy in Afghanistan. But from the point of view of Afghan women the Taliban rule was but one of many patriarchal regimes. In fact, in many parts of Afghanistan the Taliban regime did not extensively change the everyday life of Afghan women. In many parts of Afghanistan women have always stayed at home, they have never gone out without a burqa or without

the supervision of a man from their family. One might say that the Taliban regime forced a rural practice onto the women of Kabul and of the other urban centers of Afghanistan

Some recent reports on women and the electoral process, such as the Human Rights Watch report "Between Hopes and Fears" verifies that intimidations and threats are part of the everyday lives of Afghan women who wanted to vote and who want to be politically active. In accordance with the pre-elections analysis most women would vote in accordance with their husbands or other male relatives will (and the men would vote in accordance with their community elders' will).

Nevertheless, one of the presidential candidates was a woman . Massouda Jalal 's election campaign focused entirely on the fact that she was a woman. Massouda claimed that in a country where most men (including many of the presidential candidates) have killed and raped and committed other war crimes, she (as a woman) would be the only candidate without blood on her hands. The first person who voted in the Afghan elections was allegedly a 19-year old Afghan woman. Just as Massouda, this young refugee woman was by media chosen to represent the future of Afghanistan.

The post-Taliban era has anew given some women the possibility to study, work and vote, but the increasing crime rates, the ever-present sexual harassment and violence against women has also led to new forms of oppression. (Some figures indicate that over 95 % of Afghan women have been subject to violence.)

However, during Election Day I had the opportunity to visit polling stations in Kabul's old city centre and in the Microrian district (a suburb to Kabul built by the Soviets). Dressed in wellcovering cloths and a head scarf (the latter being very useful against the dusty winds) I visited ten different locations where Afghan women and men voted. Many women had defied the weather and the threats of men and decided to vote. At some of the polling stations women queued for hours (in long lines of blue burquas ) in order to be able to vote. I was especially moved by an old woman, who at ten o'clock cast her vote in a polling station I visited . She wanted to vote for the US- backed president Karzai, but as she could not read and did not know what he looked like (the ballot paper had pictures of the different candidates), she had to ask the polling station staff in front of which picture she should put her mark.

In one of the last polling stations we visited, in a dusty tent at the outskirts of Kabul, the women working at the polling station had been there since five o'clock in the morning, in the cold and without any food. The women were nevertheless content and proud to have contributed to the electoral process. (Although one of them asked us, when we thought the United Nations would pay them).

I was very much inspired by the brave and enthusiastic women that I met at the different polling stations. While the women might have voted in accordance with their husbands will they (as probably also their husbands) seemed to view the elections as one step towards an Afghanistan that is no longer ruled by foreign oppressors, war lords, drug traffickers or the Taliban.

