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Afghan elections

Afghanistan

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Dr. F. Park

If you are showing the new Afghanistan, you cannot do it with a photo of a cemetery!" explains an exasperated worker with the media production house guiding Afghan presidential candidates into the murky world of political marketing. On this occasion it is the aides of warlord Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostam who are getting a lesson in the harsh realities of the medium is the message.

Dostam, a powerful former communist warlord who controls much of northern Afghanistan, has an image problem in Afghanistan where he is known for his role in the civil war of the 1990s in which tens of thousands of people died and which paved the way for the fundamentalist Taliban militia to take power.

His team hadn't taken this into account and "wanted to show Dostam in front of a cemetery for 'martyrs' in the war against the Taliban," says Christian Marie who works as an advisor at the Kabul production house Awaz.

Awaz has received United Nations subsidies to create radio and video clips for the 18 candidates contesting the Oct. 9 polls. It also provides posters and advice on political marketing to the presidential hopefuls.

In Dostam's case, his representatives were finally persuaded to choose other photos --- one of the general in front of a building site and one in which he is wearing traditional Afghan costume. Only the slogan has been retained: "Dostam, for a new Afghanistan."

Awaz comprises about 20 workers, some 80 percent of whom are Afghan, and does more than just create an image, guiding most of the candidates into the murky depths of political marketing, a world of which they are largely ignorant.

"We have never had presidential elections," explains Dostam's spokesman Faizullah Zaki. "There were parliamen-

tary elections, ballots for local councils.... where candidates were contesting in a local area. Now, it's national."

"All this is surreal in some way," says Dominique Morissette, a Canadian filmmaker working with Awaz, explaining that young Afghan cameramen have found themselves giving future political heavyweights lessons in public speaking.

Awaz has mixed Western techniques with Afghan costumes, but largely left the candidates to present themselves.

"Afghanistan is like a village where everyone knows everything about each other. People say, 'I am the son of such and such,' and there's an understanding about who they are," says Marie.

Candidates, who range from the urbane incumbent President Hamid Karzai to warlords, poets and academics, must also adapt their messages to a public which is about 80 percent illiterate.

"Here, there is a little of the principle of the bazaar," where everyone wants to get the same thing as the next person, he says. "For the candidates it was the same thing: They saw what their rival had done and they wanted the same thing." As a result, most have opted for the same slogan - "National unity, Security."

One candidate to buck the trend is the only woman contesting the poll, Massouda Jalal. In her clip she is seen distributing bread, holding babies in her arms and taking the hand of a school student learning to write.

"Talking about security, it wasn't adopted in her case," says Marie. Jalal's slogan, "Life and Hope", was more reflective of her life as a woman, a mother and a doctor, he said. Since Sept. 7 when electoral campaigns were launched, Awaz's posters have appeared everywhere in Kabul, notably without the graffiti seen in Western democracies.