

November 6, 2003: Help Afghanistan Achieve Freedom - Kansas City Star

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November 6, 2003 A newly proposed constitution offers at least some hope that the people of Afghanistan eventually can live in freedom under the rule of law. Achieving that goal, however, will require not just perseverance on the part of the Afghan people and their leaders but more encouragement and resources from the United States and its allies. It has taken a year for Afghanistan's 35-member Constitutional Review Committee to produce this document, which will be presented for approval next month to a loya jirga, or grand council, of about 500 delegates. Next June citizens would elect a bicameral legislature as well as president and vice president. If that happens as scheduled, it will be a remarkable change for Afghanistan, which for five years until late 2001 was ruled by the brutal Taliban, religious fanatics who oppressed the people and tried to drive the country back into the seventh century. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, American and allied military forces drove the Taliban from power for harboring Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida terrorist network. But since then the effort to rebuild Afghanistan has met with mixed success as the United States has focused on Iraq. Some of the \$87 billion war-related funding Congress recently approved is designated for Afghanistan. The draft constitution represents a victory for the country's interim president, Hamid Karzai, who is widely expected to run for that office next year. It creates a powerful presidency in a country that needs stability. At the moment, Karzai's government controls little beyond the capital of Kabul. Warlords -- often at odds with Kabul -- control much of the rest of the land. The constitution declares that Afghanistan will be an Islamic republic, but it avoids adopting the harsh interpretation of Islamic law, or Sharia, that the Taliban enforced. Indeed, the document declares people of other religions are free to practice them. Still, there is reason to be concerned. Michael K. Young, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, is understandably worried that the constitution as drafted gives judges too much authority to interpret laws according to their own understandings of Islam. Beyond that, he says, the document seems to say that legislation can trump constitutionally embedded individual rights. The new constitution does build in a role for women in the new government. Under the Taliban, women were badly mistreated and denied almost all rights. In the lower house of the legislature, at least one female delegate must be elected from each of the country's 32 provinces. In the upper house, the president will appoint one-third of the members, and half of the presidential appointments must be women. The new constitution aims high, for a free Afghanistan that guards its citizens' liberties and is a productive member of the international community. The reality on the ground is much different now. It's time for President Bush and other world leaders to do more to help Afghanistan rebuild so that it can reach the goals the constitution envisions.