

DEMOCRACY ON THE FRONT LINE

Nahlah Ayed is CBC Television's correspondent in Beirut. Ayed, 35, joined the CBC in November 2002 and moved to Jordan. She immediately travelled to Iraq to cover the lead-up to the war there, returning to report on the day Baghdad fell as well as the war's aftermath. Ayed is an award-winning former parliamentary correspondent for The Canadian Press who covered the war in Afghanistan. A native of Winnipeg, she is fluent in Arabic.



photo: courtesy of the CBC

The CBC's Beirut correspondent Nahlah Ayed: People in the region "showed an unmistakable willingness to embrace the democratic process."

Covering a federal election campaign in Canada is an assignment like no other. One morning after the writ is dropped, you hand your life over to a party leader's campaign, say goodbye to your friends and disappear.

As I packed my bag in 2000 for my first campaign, I was enthralled. This was one of the most coveted experiences on Parliament Hill and, finally, I was getting my chance. But what appeared to be a plum assignment came with a heavy price: a gruelling schedule with little sleep, constant filing of stories, and more "wheels-up" on flights than I cared to count.

But as I was to learn much later, those were carefree days indeed.

Five years on I found myself reporting on a campaign of a very different kind. There were no velvet ropes, no rallies, no campaign planes or buses.

Last December 15, wearing a flak jacket and accompanied by armed security guards, I walked to a polling station in Iraq to cover the election of the country's first permanent government since Saddam Hussein was ousted. The situation in Baghdad is so tenuous that the closest the candidates could get to campaigning was putting ads on television and plastering the city with posters. Young men brave enough to distribute handbills for their favourite party did so with guns strapped to their sides.

The closest we got was a hurried interview in the garden outside our hotel with a politician named Mithal al-Alusi, a Sunni Iraqi whose optimism is rare in Baghdad. In his efforts to win influence in Iraq's new political reality, he's had 14 attempts on his life and lost two of his sons. But he still ran in the election, defying what appeared to be a determined effort to stop him in his tracks. Though he looked the part—in a sleek suit, carrying even sleeker business cards—this was a politician the likes of which I had never seen.

Over the past three years living in the Middle East, I've covered several elections that were very different from our own and that challenged my narrow definition of political reporting.

I watched as a group of supporters of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak sat in the foyer of a Cairo polling station last September singing slogans for the long-sitting president, while local election observers were barred from entry.

I frowned at the incongruity of a tank parked for security reasons outside a polling station in downtown Beirut on a sunny day last spring during Lebanon's elections. The Canadian election observers walking out of there looked entirely out of place next to a fully armed company of soldiers.

And I listened incredulously to a well-educated official in Saudi Arabia politely explain in late 2004 why the country's conservative society was not yet ready for the inclusion of women in the upcoming municipal elections.

But after turning these episodes over in my head, I began to see them differently. Iraq's election—for which the entire country had to be shut down for security reasons—attracted nearly 70 percent of eligible voters. Egypt's was the first multiple-candidate presidential election since Mubarak assumed power 24 years ago, and public criticism of his regime was aired. Lebanon's vote was the first in 30 years held without Syria's political influence. And Saudi Arabia's municipal elections have been hailed as the beginning of an expanded democratic process in which women are eventually expected to participate.

None of these elections resembled anything we in the West would define as ordinary, and some were designed to ensure a specific outcome. But to varying degrees, the people in these countries showed an unmistakable willingness to embrace the democratic process. That came through loud and clear—even without the lawn signs, rallies and campaign planes I once thought elections couldn't do without. ♣