

Voter Poem

As I write, U.S. Congressional election campaigns are well underway. The cynical, of course, may be inclined to view these as exercises in futility. But if you're so inclined, I suggest you look to an unlikely source for electoral inspiration: Iran, as portrayed in a striking new movie.

Secret Ballot, an import from Iranian writer-director Babak Payami, is a lovely consideration of the democratic process from the viewpoint of a country that has only recently taken its first baby steps in that direction. You'll hardly find American-style freedoms in Iran, but among those working to democratize the ruling theocracy through the nascent electoral process, you'll find a passionate appreciation for the right to vote—an appreciation too often lacking in our own country.

As in much of Iranian cinema, overt political messages are safely hidden under the guise of a simple parable. *Secret Ballot* follows an idealistic female election agent (Nassim Abdi) as she is escorted by a skeptical soldier (Cyrus Ab) to collect votes on a remote desert island. The film has the tranquil pacing and measured framing of a travelogue. Often keeping his camera at a discreet distance from the actors, Payami permits scenes to drift along at a pace just slow enough to allow the viewer to grasp the deeper meanings that exist in even the simplest actions.

Consider the film's opening scene, in which a large wooden box parachutes to the ground from a passing plane. A soldier slowly drags the ungainly item from one side of the frame to the other—giving its mysterious contents more import with



Government soldiers await an election agent in *Secret Ballot*.

each step—and then, maddeningly, leaves it unopened as he wakes his fellow soldier (Ab) to tell him it's his shift. Only then is the crate unsealed, revealing a ballot box and other voting paraphernalia—manna, or at least democracy, from heaven.

The election agent, who soon arrives by boat, certainly regards the box's contents as dear. Young and educated—just the sort of person pushing for political reform in Iran today—she's soon darting about the island in a desperate attempt to collect every citizen's vote before the end of the day. "Don't you see," she urges, "this is a chance for you to make your life better."

This regard for the vote as a powerful and precious tool is rare in the United States, but *Secret Ballot* makes the attitude contagious. When the soldier ponderously rows the woman out to a distant fishing boat to collect more votes—an image once again framed with delicate care—we lean forward with trepidation, hoping that the ballot box doesn't fall out of her lap and into the sea.

In a few spots, the film distances itself from the election agent's idealism, which at certain points begins to look like naivete. Many of the citizens on the island diverge from her faith in the electoral process, often for legitimate reasons. The first local she encounters frantically tries

to run away; seeing the soldier and his gun, the man fears a random arrest. The pair also run into language barriers—not all of the locals speak Farsi. And some villages have set up their own independent political systems, including a small farm run with absolute authority by an unseen matriarch, which seem in many ways more efficient and relevant than any national plebiscite. Perhaps the most common-sense objection comes from a fisherman, who tells the election agent, "Voting doesn't catch fish."

Some of these incidents reveal how absurd the democratic process can seem when dropped abruptly into a Third World culture. Others reflect oddities that even modern Americans often face when they get to the polls; when the islanders tell the woman they've never heard of any of the names on the ballot, there is a flash of recognition for nomination processes that sometimes spit out preordained names and offer few attractive choices. In all places, active citizens hate to feel like a rubber stamp.

So *Secret Ballot* isn't as blindly idealistic about the electoral process as those hectoring "Rock the Vote" ads. But it will surely make you less jaded about a right we too often take for granted.

—Josh Larsen