

## Female Afghan Filmmaker Roya Sadat Defies Odds With Her Feature Film 'Letter'

By Naman Ramachandran



Roya Sadat needs a champion. Her film, "A Letter to the President," is Afghanistan's contender in Oscar's foreign language film category, but the production just does not have the resources to mount an Oscar campaign.

"It is difficult for us, because we still haven't finished paying for the film," says Sadat. The film world premiered at Locarno in August where Hong Kong based Asian Shadows signed on for international sales.

"A Letter to the President," a social drama that follows a woman on death row who writes to the Afghanistan president explaining the societal reasons that led her to murder her husband, is playing in the Busan Film Festival's A Window on Asian Cinema section.

Sadat grew up in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, meaning that she was confined to her home and could not go to school. She discovered cinema through a book and became fascinated by the medium. She used her time at home to write plays and drafts of a screenplay that eventually became her 2003 crime drama "Three Dots."

Sadat's first act after the Taliban regime departed in 2001 was to begin shooting "Three Dots" (2003), set in her native city of Herat. The film travelled to global

festivals including Three Continents in Nantes and the Bangkok Film Festival, and along with Sidik Barmak's "Osama" (2003), which won a Golden Globe, and put Afghanistan on the world cinema map.

Upon completion of "Three Dots" she studied law and politics at university. Subsequently, along with her sister Alka, Roya set up Roya Film House, Afghanistan's first women-run film company. The company financed itself producing television dramas for the Tolo TV channel.

Sadat's next project, "The Warm Bread and the Nipple's Circle," a drama about rape and its aftermath, was accepted into Busan's Asian Project Market in 2009 and eventually went to the Goa Film Bazaar in 2013. A producer came on board but bailed in 2015, citing Afghanistan's security situation and lack of insurance. With "A Letter to the President," Sadat was determined to improve her country's almost non-existent cinema production infrastructure. Most of the cast and crew worked for little or nothing and the \$200,000 budget was spent largely on modern shooting and post-production equipment that the country lacked.

But the biggest problem Sadat faces is her gender. "The Taliban are against women, against human rights and against democracy," says Sadat. "During the Taliban years, many people became Talibanized. Those people are still living in Afghanistan now. So it is not very comfortable for women, especially those who work in the media.

"When you are talking about films, it is not easy for men even because there is no support from the government," says Sadat. She says that the government is too busy with political matters to bother about culture.

"But Afghanistans need to tell their stories to the world," Sadat continues. "A Letter to the President' tries to do this. But it's not easy."

<http://variety.com/2017/film/news/female-afghan-filmmaker-roya-sadat-defies-odd-with-her-feature-film-letter-1202589061/>



October 15, 2017 7:22PM PT

## **Busan Film Review: 'A Letter to the President'** **Afghanistan's foreign-language Oscar entry is a rough-** **edged but righteously compelling feminist drama from** **trailblazing director Roya Sadat.**

**By Guy Lodge**

Whether intentionally or otherwise, it's apt that "A Letter to the President" — the second feature by Afghan filmmaker Roya Sadat — shares a title with a 2012 essay by Erica Jong. The latter, addressed to President Obama, may push for the equal rights of women in an American context, but its vital concerns are hardly a world away from the impassioned feminist rhetoric of Sadat's film, in which a strong-willed Kabul police chief, sentenced to death after accidentally killing her abusive husband, must address her country's highest power to demand her life back.

Rough-edged as cinema, but pointed and persuasive as social polemic, this year's Afghan foreign-language Oscar submission — from the country's first female director to emerge in the post-Taliban era — is characterized by the unmistakable urgency of having been made under specifically challenging political conditions. Its furious rallying cry against a corrupt patriarchy will, however, resonate with audiences across the globe.

Sure to run well into 2018 regardless of the Academy's verdict, "A Letter to the President's" festival tour began at Locarno in August, and will be sustained particularly by programmers of human rights-themed showcases; certain films are made for post-screening Q&A sessions, and this is one. By the same reasoning, some international distribution may follow, though it's less of a cinch, owing to a few bumps in the film's technical construction and occasionally crude thriller mechanics. Message plainly outranks medium in Sadat's filmmaking, which is not to say it's formally straightforward: Both visually and narratively, "A Letter to the President" turns out to be a work of frames within frames, divides within divides.

Though it's not the first film to portray a crisis of female oppression in an Islamic state, "A Letter to the President" is unusual in its focus on a subjugated protagonist of relatively high social standing, emphasizing an extreme gender hierarchy that runs across barriers of class and privilege. Soraya (a fine, resolute Leena Alam), a married mother of two, is the head of the Kabul Crime Division, a job that makes heavy demands on her time, to the consternation of her less-accomplished husband Karim and her gangster father-in-law — both of whom regard her working as a source of familial shame. Soraya remains defiant in the face of Karim's violent censure: In one remarkable scene, she hits back harder

when he slaps her across the face, knowing full well the price she'll pay mere seconds later.

The men's resentment intensifies when Soraya becomes involved in a regional investigation that supersedes the authority of male village elders with whom her father-in-law is criminally affiliated. The already toxic relationship between Soraya and Karim disintegrates entirely; in a final altercation, she defends herself by pushing him into a plate-glass window, killing him and landing herself directly in prison.

Soraya's tragic tale, related largely in voiceover, forms the text of the "letter" — in reality, a book-length confessional — read by a fictitious President of Afghanistan (Mamnoon Maghsodi) in the film's bookending narrative, engineering a race-against-time climax as the possibility of a presidential pardon is floated ahead of her scheduled execution. It's a slightly ungainly device that nonetheless adds a surprising streak of political ambiguity to Sadat and screenwriter Aziz Deildar's angry *cri de coeur*. With the president's convictions regarding Soraya's case seemingly less fixed than that of the film's other male figures of authority — including his aides, who urge him not to read the letter, offering instead a judgmental precis — a sliver of hope is permitted into the film's otherwise damning portrait of systemic misogyny.

Bluntly edited to a dense, gripping 83 minutes, "A Letter to the President" is perhaps a touch overplotted: A subplot involving Soraya's inadvertent betrayal by an enigmatically obsessive, portrait-painting well-wisher (played by Deildar) never quite clicks into place, even as it culminates in its own separate act of extremity. Alam is sufficiently riveting in the lead to render unwelcome any such focus-pulling; even when the script is at its most didactic, she gives proceedings a fully energized, exasperated human center.

Shooting in scorched, sober digital hues of tan and charcoal, often with theatrical flourishes of selective lighting, Sadat and cinematographer Behrouz Bhadrour filter the action through a series of potentially obstructive layers to our view: Several key scenes of confrontation and revelation take place through partially reflective window panes or gauzy curtaining. It's an unpretty, unsubtle but symbolically effective aesthetic ploy, alluding to any number of thinly concealed truths and abuses in modern Afghanistan. In "A Letter to the President," women like Soraya — and Sadat, for that matter — have to shout all the louder to be heard above their society's soundproofing.

Reviewed at Busan Film Festival (A Window on Asian Cinema), Oct. 15, 2017. (Also at Locarno Film Festival — Open Doors.) (Original title: "Namai ba rahis gomhor")

Production: (Afghanistan) A Roya Film House production in partnership with Kaboora Prods. (International sales: Asian Shadows, Hong Kong.) Producers: Roya Sadat, Aziz Deildar. Executive producers: Ahmed Shakeib Mosavi, Paktash Parwani. CREW: Director: Roya Sadat. Screenplay: Aziz Deildar. Camera (color,

HD): Behrouz Bhadrourj. Editor: Razi Kashi, Ahmad Farid Farahmand. Music: Zabih Mahdi.

With: Leena Alam, Aziz Deildar, Mammnon Maghsodi, Zareen Nory, Mahmoud Aryoubi, Asad-Ullah Tajzai, Farzana Nawabi, Qadir Aryaie. (Farsi dialogue)

<http://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/a-letter-to-the-president-review-1202590404/>

## **Oscars: Afghanistan Selects 'A Letter to the President' for Foreign-Language Category**

**4:55 AM PDT 9/27/2017 by Nick Holdsworth**



Roya Sadat's drama of a female official intervening to save a woman from tribal punishment reflects harsh realities.

Afghanistan has selected Roya Sadat's drama *A Letter to the President* as its candidate for the best foreign-language film race at the Oscars.

A look at the harsh realities facing women in today's Afghanistan, the film follows Soraya (Leena Alam) a lowly female public official who struggles to observe modern laws when confronted with ancient tribal rules that condemn another woman to a brutal punishment. Finding herself on the wrong side of the law after being arrested for her efforts, her only hope of redemption is through a direct written appeal to the president.

Dramatic tension builds as Soraya finds herself literally walking to her own execution while elsewhere the president is only just reading her letter and her children play in a garden, unaware of their mother's fate.

The film, Sadat's debut feature, was shown last month in the Locarno Film Festival's Open Doors program and is due for a competition screening next month at the Busan Film Festival.

*A Letter to the President* was produced by Sadat and Aziz Deldar of Roya Film House. World sales are being handled by Hong Kong's Asian Shadows.

Afghanistan has been submitting films to the Oscars since 2002, but has never been short-listed or nominated in the foreign-language category.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/oscars-afghanistan-selects-a-letter-president-foreign-language-category-1043533>



# The New York Times

## In Her Film About Afghan Life, the Woman Slaps Back

By MUJIB MASHALNOV. 26, 2017



*Roya Sadat with her son at her film company's offices in Kabul, Afghanistan. Ms. Sadat's latest film, "A Letter to the President," is Afghanistan's submission for best foreign language film at the Oscars. Credit Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times*

KABUL, Afghanistan — He raised his hand, ready to assert what he considered his right in a male-dominated society where the husband's word is final.

She was an accomplished police detective feared by the city's criminals, and also a wife and mother of two. Her duties clashed with the expectations at home, despite all her efforts to balance them.

There on the movie screen, he slapped her — and she slapped back. Harder. The audience, about 60 people in a smoke-filled Kabul theater, erupted in applause.



*Ms. Sadat, center, and crew members at a test shoot for a TV drama she is directing. Ms. Sadat met her husband and filmmaking partner, Aziz Dildar, during one such TV project. Credit Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times*

“People love that slap,” said Roya Sadat, the director of the 85-minute film, “A Letter to the President,” now Afghanistan’s submission for best foreign language film at the Academy Awards next year. “It’s not easy for the people to accept a woman slapping a man. But the film affects them. The slap is a really enjoyable slap — in fact, it’s a slap to the face of all the injustice women face here.”

Ms. Sadat and her crew say that just the fact of having made “A Letter to the President” — a feature film made to high standards under difficult circumstances — feels like a victory. But the real payoff is the reaction to the slap, and the idea that they are succeeding in getting a male-dominated society to empathize with a working woman.

“We have always had an oppressor, and an oppressed, but we have had little discussion of the environment in which the accused lives in,” Ms. Sadat said.

By the accused, she means her protagonist — Suraya, the senior police detective, who ends up accidentally killing her husband while defending herself from another violent outburst. The letter to the president of the movie’s title is hers; she is writing from prison, where she has landed on death row.





*A staff meeting of Ms. Sadat's film company. Credit Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times*

Suraya's once-happy marriage grew sour when the demands of her work in a conservative society started raising her husband's suspicions at home. Her father-in-law, whose shady business partners feel the pressure of Suraya's investigations, kept appealing to his son's honor to restrict her movements and keep her at home.

From the time she conceived the story in 2010, it took Ms. Sadat about seven hard years to complete the film. More frustrating were the bureaucratic hurdles afterward, as she tried to meet simple criteria for Oscar selection.

Organizing screenings at commercial cinemas was a difficult task because there are just a couple of government cinemas, and they usually show only old Indian movies. If a director wants to screen her own film, she has to rent the cinema and then go through a lengthy process of her film's content being checked.

Officials at the country's highest cinematic institution, the Afghan Film commission, also dragged their feet in signing a letter she needed as part of her submission, Ms. Sadat said.



*Actors in Ms. Sadat's new drama taking a break on set. Her son can be seen in the background. Credit Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times*

She began making movies as a high school student in the western city of Herat. "Three Dots," her first film, about a young woman forced to smuggle drugs, was made more than a decade ago with simple gear in a secluded village that now is under Taliban control. But even back in the early 2000s it felt like the Wild West, she said.

One night during the weeklong shoot, Ms. Sadat said, the women in one of the village houses started cheering and celebrating. When she asked what the occasion was, they said their husbands, who lived as bandits, had captured another vehicle passing through.

"Three Dots" caught the eye of Afghanistan's largest media conglomerate, Moby Group. Moby invited her to direct two television dramas. She directed 50 episodes of one, and three seasons of another.

During one of those projects she met her husband, Aziz Dildar, a young university lecturer in theater who was quickly rushed in as a replacement when one of the main actors, much to Ms. Sadat's frustration, had shown up with a shaved head.



*Ms. Sadat and her two children at home in Kabul. Balancing the obligations of family and professional life is one of the themes of "A Letter to the President."*  
*Credit Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times*

They became an artistic power couple, complementing and supporting each other. The offices of their company, Roya Film House, are below their apartment, in the basement.

Ms. Sadat says she feels lucky to be married to an artist who is as passionate about film as she is. Mr. Dildar writes the screenplays for their projects, and when she gets into the intense shooting period, he steps in to help. During the 40 days of shooting "A Letter to the President," Ms. Sadat's youngest child was barely a year old. Mr. Dildar would oversee the work on the set while she would disappear for brief periods to feed their child.

"If it had been someone other than Aziz, I don't think they would have understood me as much," Ms. Sadat said. "Because when I am working, I forget the mundane, I am up till 2 or 3 in the morning."

Ms. Sadat tried for years to find a producer for her latest film, but no one was willing to take it on because of the uncertain security environment. So she and Mr. Dildar produced it themselves. They sold one of their two vehicles, an apartment Ms. Sadat had bought with past directorial fees, and her wedding jewelry.





*Guests attending a private open-air screening of “A Letter to The President” in Kabul. Credit Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times*

She also relied on friends. Moby Group provided security and technical staff. Friends offered their houses as sets. Leena Alam, the actress playing Suraya, agreed to take the role for a small sum — which she has yet to be paid.

Because Afghanistan lacks established film studios, each set needed to be created from scratch. And location scouting was a feat in itself, not just because of Ms. Sadat’s exacting eye, but also because of safety considerations.

The scenes in the villages required particularly creative maneuvering, where the crew had to quickly wrap up before word got out that a movie was being shot.

For a prison scene, for example, Ms. Sadat and her crew chose a school. She mixed several shades of paint to find the right color for the walls, and the crew got busy painting. Allergies forced her to go to a hospital that night, but she was back on the set early the next morning.

Mamnoon Maqsoodi, the veteran Afghan actor who plays the president in the film, called its success a remarkable testament to Ms. Sadat’s passion and attention to detail.

“I am touched by her work,” Mr. Maqsoodi said.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/26/world/asia/afghanistan-woman-filmmaker.html>



Laura Berger  
Senior Editor at Women and Hollywood  
Sep 29 2017

## **Roya Sadat's "A Letter to the President" Is Afghanistan's Foreign-Language Oscar Pick**

Roya Sadat is joining the foreign-language Oscar race. Afghanistan has submitted her feature debut, "A Letter to the President," as its pick for the upcoming ceremony, The Hollywood Reporter confirms.

The drama stars Leena Alam as a low-tier female official struggling to "observe modern laws when confronted with ancient tribal rules that condemn another woman to a brutal punishment," the source summarizes. "Finding herself on the wrong side of the law after being arrested for her efforts, her only hope of redemption is through a direct written appeal to the president." Sadat penned the script and served as a producer.

"A Letter to the President" made its world premiere at the Locarno Film Festival in August and will screen at the Busan Film Festival next month.

"Before the Taliban rule, I used to write scripts and direct plays in my school," Sadat has said. "I wrote my first play when I was all of nine. But once the Taliban came, girls could not attend school. My mother and aunt were determined that our education should not suffer and so we were taught at home," she recalled. "As soon as the Taliban left, I took up my studies and graduated in law and political science from Herat University. But my heart was in filmmaking. My uncle in Iran sent me DVDs and books on cinema and script writing."

This marks the second time that Afghanistan has chosen a woman-directed film to rep the country at the Oscars since they started submitting in 2002. The first was Sonia Nassery's "The Black Tulip."

Other women-directed films in the running for foreign-language noms include Kirsten Tan's "Pop Aye," a drama about a man who is reunited with his childhood elephant, Angelina Jolie's "First They Killed My Father," an adaptation of human rights activist Loung Ung's non-fiction book, and Annemarie Jacir's "Wajib," a dramedy about a father and his estranged son.

<https://blog.womenandhollywood.com/roya-sadats-a-letter-to-the-president-is-afghanistan-s-foreign-language-oscar-pick-c0e7b001482c>





## TOP 2017 Foreign Policy's Leading Global Thinkers



Director Roya Sadat on set in Kabul on Nov. 19. (Jesse Dittmar for Foreign Policy)

Roya Sadat

For bringing the story of Afghan women to the screen

Roya Sadat

Writer and film director, 34

Afghanistan

Notable Fact:

Under the Taliban, one of Sadat's seven sisters used to dress up in men's clothing so the girls could leave the house with her as their "male chaperone." She even took a male name: Sohrab.

By Sune Engel Rasmussen

As a teenager, while working as a medical assistant at Afghanistan's Herat hospital, Roya Sadat organized performances for 300 female colleagues in a gender-segregated ward, dramatizing the Taliban's appalling treatment of women. Ten girls kept lookout for their boss, a Talib who always carried a cable to whip disobedient staffers, a fate Sadat escaped.

“Now, when I think back, it was really dangerous,” she says with a laugh, speaking by phone from Kabul.

Today, she is one of Afghanistan’s most prominent film directors and a leading conveyor of female narratives in a society where women remain largely subdued. This year, her feature *A Letter to the President* — about a female police chief whose struggle against tribal laws lands her in prison — is Afghanistan’s pick to compete for a foreign-language Oscar. The film includes a poignant scene in which the protagonist slaps her abusive husband across the face, a daring plot move in Afghanistan.

For most Afghan girls growing up under the Taliban in the late 1990s, a career in cinema would have been unfathomable, given that public expressions of female creativity were suppressed. But while her mother home-schooled her, Sadat’s father, a businessman who lost everything when the fundamentalist regime took over in 1996, nurtured her intellect and provided access to forbidden culture. Though TVs were banned by the Taliban, on some nights when Sadat was a teenager, he would blacken the windows of their house and bring out his television set and VCR.

As a child, Sadat often preferred reading and writing over the Bollywood imports her family watched, but she did like storytelling, particularly her father’s recitations of *One Thousand and One Nights*. He was the one who encouraged her to believe that girls could write stories and poetry. At age 9, she wrote her first play, about a son who leaves Afghanistan and sends letters home — futilely, given that his family is illiterate. After 2001, Sadat channeled her love for theater and novels into cinematic narratives, setting her on a path to becoming Afghanistan’s first post-Taliban female director.

She was barely out of her teens when her first film, about a married woman who smuggles drugs for warlords in order to support her children, debuted in 2003; backed by Afghan director Siddiq Barmak and a Japanese production company, the feature won six awards at an Afghan film festival organized by Tolo, the largest national TV station, and went on to make the rounds at international festivals. She cut her teeth directing TV dramas and documentaries and, with her filmmaker sister Alka, founded the production company *Roya Film House*. In 2013, Sadat launched Afghanistan’s first women’s film festival.

“To young Afghan women, [*Roya*] is an example of what you can be. That can be transformative,” says Noorjahan Akbar, a leading activist and founder of *Free Women Writers*, a blog for Afghan women. “She often tells the stories of Afghan women, which is important because we are often talked about — whether it is at dinner tables or television programs — but rarely spoken or listened to.... When we have movies, articles, poetry narratives by Afghan women about our own lives, it can be revolutionary.”

Artistic production by the country’s women “not only challenges patriarchy in Afghanistan but also the somewhat prevalent Western notion that Afghan

women are only to be pitied as their new charity case, instead of listened to as stakeholders in their own future,” Akbar says.

Sadat believes that a society without female stories is incomplete.

For Sadat, moods, feelings, and family life are “different for women and men.” Women cry more easily than men because they “can think deeper about the world — about humanity,” she says, noting that while urban Afghanistan has undergone rapid changes, most Afghans still grow up in families steeped in fundamentalist ideas. “I really believe in cinema. If we want to change anything in this country, we must use culture.”

Sune Engel Rasmussen is the Guardian’s correspondent in Afghanistan.

<https://gt.foreignpolicy.com/2017/profile/roya-sadat>