

Beauty Pageants Attract Ugly Comments

Hi there, and welcome back to As It Is. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

Today we are talking about beauty pageants.

Beauty pageants are contests in which women and girls compete for prizes. The participants, also called contestants, usually show their clothes, talents and personalities. The contestants are judged for their beauty, to be sure. But in modern pageants, they are also judged for their character.

This month, people around the world have been talking critically about beauty pageants.

In the United States, some people have made racist comments about the new Miss America. Nina Davuluri is the first Indian American to win the contest.

In France, a new bill proposes that girls under the age of 16 not be allowed to participate in beauty pageants.

But first, we go to Indonesia, where the Miss World pageant is being held this month. Indonesia has the world's largest population of Muslims. Some conservative Muslims have protested the pageant. They say the pageant is just an excuse to show women's bodies.

The Miss World organizers have answered the charges by changing one of the events. Contestants at the Miss World pageant are not wearing two-piece swim suits, or bikinis, this year. And much of the contest is taking place on the island of Bali, where most people are Hindu.

But some Muslim groups are still protesting the pageant — in a creative way. They are holding a pageant of their own in Jakarta.

Mario Ritter tells us about Miss Muslimah 2013.

Twenty Muslim women from six countries competed in the Miss Muslimah pageant this year. All wore hijabs — dresses and scarves that covered their bodies from head to foot. Instead of dancing or singing, the contestants recited Koranic verses for the judges. And they spoke about their beliefs about Islam in the modern world.

Last Wednesday, Obabiyi Aishah Ajibola won the Miss Muslimah pageant. She is 21 years old and from Nigeria. Ms. Ajibola won about \$2,000 in prize money and a trip to Mecca and India, where she will help educate children.

The Miss Muslimah pageant promotes a more modest idea of beauty, says Eka Shanti. She founded Miss Muslimah three years ago. Ms. Shanti was an Indonesian television news reporter. But she lost her job because she wanted to wear her headscarf on television.

Ms. Shanti says Miss Muslimah is a peaceful protest against the Western-style Miss World contest.

Andreas Harsono is from the Indonesian branch of Human Rights Watch. He says Miss Muslimah and Miss World are not so different from each other. They are both, he says, beauty contests.

“They are talking about the beauties of women, albeit that this one is branded with Islam, you know, wearing the hijab, etcetera. That it is OK. Meanwhile, if the same argument is being used against them, you know exposing sexualism, of course this Islamic contest can also be branded as an un-Islamic.”

Most people in Indonesia practice a moderate form of Islam. But Mr. Harsono says laws in Indonesia are increasingly requiring women to wear the hijab.

I’m Mario Ritter.

In the United States, the winner of the Miss America pageant was crowned last week. Nina Davuluri is the first Indian American winner. Ms. Davuluri was born in New York. Her parents are from India.

She is 24 years old and graduated from the University of Michigan with many academic awards.

She says she will use the \$50,000 in prize money to help pay for medical school. Ms. Davuluri would like to become a cardiologist—a heart doctor.

Ms. Davuluri says she always thought of herself as “first and foremost American.” But after she won the pageant, some people wrote on social media sites that she was part of the terrorist group al-Qaida or un-American.

The comments started a debate about racism and nationalism. At the University of Michigan, one teacher said many people made positive comments. Professor Aswin Punathambeker’s family is also from India. He said many people pointed out that South Asians have a long history in the United States, and that America is a diverse country with many cultures.

An evening talk show in India also discussed the Miss America pageant. Commenters on NDTV’s website noted that some Americans had expressed opinions about Ms. Davuluri that were racist, sexist and incorrect. But the website said that a large population of Americans also believes Ms. Davuluri represents everything that is good and diverse about the United States.

On the NDTV talk show, one person asked viewers what they would do if an “all-American” looking woman were in an Indian beauty pageant.

“Would you crown her Miss India? I’m not sure.”

The conversation continues on the Internet and on talk shows. Everyone seems to agree that what people consider beautiful often depends on where they live. But as the world becomes smaller, ideas about beauty are changing.

And, in France, the Senate has voted to ban beauty pageants for children under 16.

French lawmakers say they are trying to prevent girls from being sexualized too early. A new bill proposes that anyone who enters a child in a beauty pageant could be sentenced to two years in prison and 30,000 euros in fines.

The bill now goes to the lower house of parliament for another vote.

Beauty pageants for girls are popular mostly in rural areas in France. The children often wear make-up and formal dresses.

Critics say the pageants, advertising and even stores that sell sexy clothes for young girls teach children too early that they are sexual beings.

Some pageant organizers say they try not to make the contests too grown-up. For instance, they ban make-up, swimming suits and high heels.

The Socialist government's equal rights minister says his party may push for a compromise measure on pageants when the bill goes to the lower house.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

That's As It Is. If you would like to reach us, send an email to learningenglish@voanews.com