

# LETTER FROM AFGHANISTAN: Elections serve up food for thought, for Afghan youth

*By Philip Smucker*

At the newly-established “50/50” fast food restaurant on the tree-lined streets of Herat, in the west of Afghanistan, business is brisk as deliveries are whisked away, on the back of motorbikes to hungry customers across the ancient city.

But for the people of Herat, it’s more than pizza and sandwiches that are on their minds; the real food for thought is whether to participate in key parliamentary and district elections in October later this year. Many Afghans say they are weary of politics and politicians, and many will not cast their ballots in the upcoming polls.

The 50/50 restaurant owner, 26-year-old Farhad Majidi, said he is now convinced of the need to be part of the democratic process. “I’ve decided I will register. It is a developing situation, but we are crossing from old generation to the next; in some cases from warlords to well-informed youth. This generation, of which I am a part, believes wholeheartedly in democracy. And we are the Afghan generation that increasingly has the power to build the future.”

In a country that is still recovering from years of conflict and in which extremist groups regularly carry out attacks against civilians, these elections, and a presidential vote that will take place in 2019, are considered an important step in Afghanistan’s path towards peace, reconciliation, democracy and a future that includes all Afghans.



UNAMA/Fardin Waezi

Voter registration is underway in Afghanistan ahead of elections in October 2018.

## United Nations support

Afghan candidates will contest 249 seats in the National Assembly, whose representatives serve five year terms. Crucially, district-wide voting will also take place, offering local representation for even the most remote regions of the country. Despite the ambitious plan, many registration centres remain closed due to security concerns.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), along with the broader international community, is supporting the Afghan-led elections process in various ways, including through the provision of technical assistance and procurement support.

Although the Independent Election Commission (IEC) says that more than three million Afghans have registered to vote, challenges remain, particularly outside large urban centres. In remoter areas, the process of registering to vote remains hindered by constant threats from insurgent groups, who have boasted about their interference locally and nationally.



UNAMA/Fraidoon Poya

Afghan women register as voters in Sultan High School, Herat province.

## Social media chatter

There is evidence that young people like Farhad Majidi are now more committed to the democratic process. "We are seeing lively chat on social media about these elections, particularly from young Afghans," said Fraidoon Poya, who works in UNAMA's Herat regional office. "We also see educated youth,

including many women, putting their names forward as candidates. The young are quite hopeful, and we do our best to support public debate and dialogue from candidates and voters by supporting events through the media.”

Afghan officials had said in April that they hoped to register as many as 14 million voters, an ambitious target “Right now, registration is going well in Herat City, but there are continuing threats from insurgent groups keen to upend the democratic process,” said Fraidoon Poya.



UNAMA/Jaffar Rahim

Afghan men and women register as voters at a centre in Bamyan ahead of elections in October 2018.

## Security challenges

Despite the optimism, security remains a challenge across the country. In 2014, insurgent groups warned voters not to vote in the presidential election and the subsequent run-off, later admitting to cutting off the index fingers in eleven instances in one province, where citizens did not heed their demand.

Nearly two decades of international economic assistance has not brought stability, and the past decade has seen a deterioration of the security situation in some regions of the country. Although President Ashraf Ghani has presented an open offer for peace talks with the country’s main insurgent grouping, the Taliban, no official peace process has taken shape.

The democratic process has been marred again this year by violence, prompting UNAMA’s chief, Tadamichi Yamamoto, to caution in early May that fresh attacks on registration stations were “nothing less than an assault on democracy.”

In eastern Afghanistan, the registration process improved following the banning of motorcycles, which are sometimes used for hit-and-run attacks.

Efforts, led by the IEC, to create voting measures that prevent fraud and help protect every citizen's right to vote are also underway, a process which has progressed with stops, starts and rethinks, eliciting intense public criticism.

Despite those concerns, United Nations officials familiar with the efforts to register and get out the vote in Afghanistan, say that enthusiasm and interest has grown in one key demographic segment of society – that of Afghanistan's younger generation.