

## **Afghanistan elections: Numbed by war, generations of Afghans seek solace in voting**

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"I am a bit afraid of the security situation, especially after the Taliban warned people to not take part in the election, but I can't wait to cast my vote," a first-time voter, Samiullah Mehri said.

***An Afghan street vendor sits on his hand cart on the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan. Millions of Afghans are expected to go to the polls on Saturday to elect a new president. It is estimated the polls and a potential second round of voting " held if the first round is inconclusive " will cost 0 million. (AP Photo)***

**Kabul:** Nearly two decades ago, an Afghan man risked his life to protect the country's prized artefacts by hiding them in the basement of the central bank office in Kabul as Taliban Islamists destroyed the capital's museum.

Omara Khan Masoudi, a former director of the National Museum, witnessed the tumultuous period that led to the Soviet occupation, followed by civil war, the Taliban regime and then the still-continuing U.S.-backed war against the insurgents.

***An Afghan election commission worker carries ballot boxes and election material to be transported to the polling stations in Jalalabad, Afghanistan September 26, 2019. REUTERS/Parwiz***

Masoudi, 71, achieved success as a custodian of Afghanistan's historical relics but he feels anguish just before a presidential election. Leaders have failed to be guardians and defenders of the national interest, he said.

"An election is one of the main exercise of a democratic system but it has lost its meaning in Afghanistan," Masoudi said at his residence.

Decades of war destroyed people's lives and holding elections despite the violence is a reminder of Afghans' ability to withstand adversity, Masoudi said.

"To risk one's life for a vote, proves a commitment towards democracy," said Masoudi, who is now a cultural consultant to UNESCO for Afghanistan.

"I lost hope in the election process when I learnt that it can be easily rigged by politicians. It becomes a wasted effort, but I have to vote to protect my rights," Masoudi said.

***The Taliban have warned Afghanistan's 9.6 million eligible voters to stay away from polling stations during Saturday's presidential election. Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah " who shared power for five years in a so-called unity government " are the leading contenders in the election. (AP Photo/Rahmat Gul)***

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First-time voter, Samiullah Mehri, 21, a cricketer based in Kabul who has lived through the U.S.-led war against the

Taliban, said he was very excited to take part.

Cricket was first adopted by Afghans in the refugee camps of cricket-loving Pakistan, to where more than three million had fled the Soviet invasion and civil war in the 1980s and 1990s. It has since made huge strides in the country, particularly among ethnic Pashtuns in the eastern border provinces.

The Taliban banned games such as cricket and football in the early years of their austere rule because they believed they kept men away from prayers, but they later became more tolerant of cricket.

From there, despite at least two attacks in the past few years on cricket matches claimed by the ultra-radical Islamic State group, the game now rivals football for popularity in a country that has long been cut off from the international sport.

“I am a bit afraid of the security situation, especially after the Taliban warned people to not take part in the election, but I can’t wait to cast my vote,” Mehri said. “Elections brings a sense of continuity to our development. For me personally it means that we will have a better life and we will create new opportunities.”

- AP