

TheNational

No fear of violence as poll queue forms

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MAZAR-E-SHARIF, AFGHANISTAN // While voters in many parts of Afghanistan were forced to brave the threat of Taliban attacks yesterday, most residents of Balkh province had little more to contend with than queuing up in the blazing mid-summer sun to cast their ballots.

Abdul Shakur, who was waiting for a polling station to open at 7am, said he was not afraid of violence on election day, because insurgents have very little presence in the province. But he mentioned a recent spate of suicide attacks in Kabul, and said security should be the top priority for any president.

“I’m not happy with the Karzai government,” he added, saying that there had not been enough reconstruction during Hamid Karzai’s presidency.

Mohammad Farhad said he also hoped for a change in government.

“There’s too much corruption,” he said.

Mr Farhad, 20, added that he had voted for Yunis Qanooni in the 2004 presidential election. The legal voting age is 18, but there were widespread reports of underage voting in that election.

At least one young man was prevented from voting this time around by police who did not believe he was 18 years old.

Admittedly, Nek Mohammad looked younger than 18, despite the voting card he displayed outside a polling station in the dusty, windswept village of Asab Grog. “I want to vote for Karzai,” he said. “I’m waiting here.”

Haji Mohammad Yusif, who was sitting in the shade of a mud-brick wall with a group of other elderly men, said he also supported Mr Karzai. But he was not actually sure who he marked his ballot for.



“My eyes are so weak I couldn’t see the pictures clearly so I just chose one,” he said, laughing. “All of them are my brothers.”

There was a similarly relaxed atmosphere in the town of Balkh, which is surrounded by massive mud walls and was once known as the “mother of all cities”. Before being sacked by Genghis Khan, Balkh was a centre of learning, and the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism has its roots there. Rabia Balkhi, the famous female poet who is believed to have lived in the 10th century, is entombed in a park in the centre of town.

In a polling site across the road, a gaggle of election observers representing various provincial council candidates watched as people trickled in to cast ballots. Hassan Khan, an official with the Independent Elections Commission, reminded voters to make their decisions independently.

“Observers do not have the right to tell people who to vote for,” he announced loudly. “Everyone has the right to choose a candidate.”

On the street outside the centre, some voters stopped to chat with friends while vendors sold fruit from stalls, and horse-drawn carriages passed by, loaded with passengers. As it is in most democracies, voting was a special but simple task for Afghans lucky enough to live outside areas ravaged by fighting.

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