



# Election Time in Kabul

EACH VOTE REPUDIATES THE TALIBAN

**D**uring the rainy spring in Kabul it is painfully simple to turn eyes skyward and, ignoring the all-seeing aerostat balloon, to imagine being home. Though the wet weather forced Kabul's children to reel in the famous kites that compete with the military blimps for the sky, it exposed another city wonder.

Like the paper kites that float above the city, swooping black kites — sharp-taloned raptors that soars on thermal winds throughout Afghanistan — appeared ethereal as they silently flocked by the hundreds, stacked layer upon layer into the heavens, to escape the incoming storms. Ancients credited such kites with resurrection of the dead. As with so much here, the scene inspires awe while still sparking trepidation.

After gathering, black kites migrate out of Afghanistan with the changing season. As the national election season has unfolded, many capable of it have migrated as well. My favorite carpet dealer took his father to the doctor in Pakistan; businessmen found work calling in Dubai; and American diplomats and service members arranged for leave in the U.S.

As a measure of confidence, the migration does not bode well. A more worrying sign is Afghanistan's 2013 net migration rate, a brain drain, of nearly two departures for every 1,000 citizens.

With Taliban-promised violence aiming at preventing a legitimate national election — the beginning of the first peaceful, democratic transfer of power in Afghan history — it is difficult to fault anyone who discovered urgent business elsewhere. But those who left missed the culmination of more than a decade of work, struggle and sacrifice.

A trip past a Kabul voting registration center in recent weeks witnessed lines of turbaned men, burqa-wearing women and many young people (two-thirds of Afghans are under 25) stretching down the street. Rumors of roaming gunmen were ignored to secure a say in the nation's future. In this city, where the Taliban recently attacked hotels, government ministries and election centers, it was an uplifting display of courage and normality.

A week ago, while traveling in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif, our vehicle took a wrong turn and merged with a flowing tributary of ecstatic citizenry. We found ourselves trapped by families on donkeys and men posing on horseback, amid groups parading with signs and electoral flags and among buses carrying Afghan elders pressing bearded, wrinkled faces against the windows. They were all headed to a vast rally for Abdullah Abdullah, a leading presidential candidate. The crowd's flow pushed us into a larger torrent of campaign enthusiasts, all jubilantly honking, clapping and singing as they marched.

The situation represented a security nightmare, as the sweat staining our body armor attested.

At the same time, the exultant waves, thumbs up and raised index fingers for the #1 ballot position of the Abdullah ticket — a civic passion that accompanied our armored vehicle for over a mile — offered tremendous comfort that time here — and friends who will never return home — sacrificed for something truly worthwhile.

A screeching turn down an alley, away from the crowds, prevented our witnessing the rally itself, or the riotous *buzkashi* game (the perfect analogy for electoral politics) afterwards. Abdullah's speech, I read later, could barely be heard over the crowd's enthusiasm

and no violence marred the event. A few days later Ashraf Ghani, another front-runner candidate, held a competing rally in the same city, also without incident.

Americans did not come to Afghanistan to build a Jeffersonian democracy, though I remember that chest-thumping rhetoric. We do not leave one behind as we depart. After all, the original Jeffersonian democracy excluded all women from public life, codified human enslavement, excluded many non-property holders from the franchise and spread westward with a policy of genocide. Reality rarely compares well against an ideal.

Even now our imperfect democracy casts aside legal protections for minority voters, restricts the ease of registering to vote and erects hurdles to casting ballots. We struggle with the role of wealth in our system.

By comparison, the Afghan vice-presidential candidates include a female governor as well as warlords, tickets are ethnically balanced to prevent strife, and though violence prevented some voting, Afghans turned out in the millions, many encouraged by "Get Out The Vote" rap lyrics ([wkly.ws/1q2](http://wkly.ws/1q2)) financed by the government. Campaign money is handled with duffle bags.

This is without doubt an Afghan, not a Jeffersonian, democracy. Imperfect, but with popular support. Afghans cast seven million votes, almost twice 2009, despite 146 incidents of Election Day violence compared to over 500 last election.

**There are challenges ahead.** Kipling's Central Asian "Great Game" over resources and geopolitics continues to victimize average Afghans and enrich an elite few. Kabul's wealth eclipses dire poverty in the countryside. Discrimination against women and minorities is pervasive. Foreign soldiers and foreign aid determine much of the country's fate.

But the miracle of this nation's transformation, from Taliban thugs executing women in a packed Kabul soccer stadium to Election Day, cannot be overemphasized. Nor can the bravery of the Afghan people — each vote cast represented a repudiation of the Taliban.

The electoral results remain uncertain. It is possible the Taliban or losing candidates will plunge the nation into civil war. Friends who served in Iraq's al-Anbar Province know that inked fingers can turn into black al Qaeda-associated banners, especially when the watered-down ink of electoral fraud is common.

I choose to remember the words of an Afghan friend, spoken over chai while negotiating for a carpet. "You Americans have given us another chance, and no matter what we do with it, you should know that you have our thanks."

Historians and politicians will long debate events in Afghanistan; the American public may tire of the discussion. But those who have served struggle to find meaning in duty here, in what we've done and what we've failed to do. I hope these days will define my years in Afghanistan and lead to the conclusion that they made sense, that it was all justifiable.

In reality, black kites cannot bring back those lost but what has been given up has given life to a new course for the nation.

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