

Change of hat

By Noor Beasharat (London), Dec 24, 2002

Besharat is a poet and writer from Afghanistan. He was born in Kabul and left his country 23 years ago when Russians invaded Afghanistan. Besharat has worked in support of humanitarian projects in countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Yugoslavia, Lesotho, UK and Afghanistan. He has written the following article after a visit to Afghanistan working on a research project.

Finally the plane touched the ground and along with many other passengers I saw the sunshine of my birth country after more than 20 years of leaving Kabul. My heart was beating with excitement and as soon as my feet were on the ground I went on my knees to kiss the ground. I had been missing the taste and smell of the soil of my country since childhood.

The idea of coming back was to work with a humanitarian organisation for the purpose of contributing to the reconstruction efforts. I never had the chance to go back earlier, first because of the Russians and then Mujahideens and recently the Taliban. But this time it was different or at least that is what I was told. I wanted to see my country governed by the people who really wanted to serve. I wanted to see a great change to what was during the Soviet Union supported government, the Mujahiddeen and the Taliban. I went there with an open mind. I went there to be receptive to the ideas of developing my country with others who share the same goal.

Just some days after arrival I decided to go around and explore the city of Kabul. Etched were fond memories of this historical city, which had made me so impatient to see it again, and I had been waiting for the time when I could go back. Nostalgia. So there it was Kabul. The city that Babar the Mughol emperor had been so in love with. The poets wrote poems of it and the travellers admired it. That was of course a long time ago but at least in my time, Kabul was wearing the proud dress of history with its museums packed with evidence of the glorious era, its libraries full of books, its archives alive and its university of high repute. Alas I saw nothing resembling my memories. Kabul in complete ruin, this is what I went back to.

At the end every square metre of Afghanistan was painful. The Rulers in power in Afghanistan are still fundamentalists preaching through the voices of Mullahs who wake up early in the morning shouting at the people using their noisy loudspeakers criticizing those Afghan men for allowing their daughters to go to schools and their families to watch TV. Ironically Afghan TV does not offer anything especial. Women singers are not allowed to perform and there is nothing entertaining or educational, but cheap-censored Indian films and speeches by strict politicians capturing the TV screen, day in and day out.

Outside, the streets are full of beautiful and vulnerable children of both sexes begging along with the disabled old men and women. Yet ministers are zooming with big cars from here to there. Every thing is just acting like a play away from reality. The warlord system is evident in all aspects of life. Mullahs with long beards demand to have bigger organisations and outfits supported by the international and UN funding. Having bigger organisations has nothing to do with reform and development but just to consolidate more power, more wealth and having more and more people under their control. It is nothing to do with employment generation as well. Because employment is only

provided for family, friends or people of the same clan and party. If you are none of these then, you simply do not exist.

Horrifying stories become alive and they touch you, torture you and traumatise you. The story of Zardad, who had a man-eating dog who was indeed a man. The story of Hezbe Wahdat eye gauging and cutting women's breast. The stories of raping women and keeping them naked in cellars of the houses. The story of Sayaf's party hammering nails on the scalp of innocent civilians. The stories of destruction beyond recognition. The stories of madness, madness and madness. And of course the story of sadness because the same mad people are in power again.

Some of the stories like this I am relating, would appear in novels of most imaginative writers and the people would think it is fiction. But actually these are the true stories of Afghanistan. One story goes that there was a mad commander with long dirty and greasy hair who nourished lice on his head and who would routinely block the road with his bandit group demanding money from the travellers in the most unusual way. He would stop people and ask them to buy his lice, starting conversations like, "hey brother give me the palm of your hand" and the person stopped by the authority would oblige by stretching out his palm. The commander would put one of his lice on the palm of the traveller's hand. The traveller watches with disgust but cannot react knowing the commander would shoot him if he does not do whatever the commander wants. And the commander would authoritatively say' "so tell me how much you pay for this healthy lice?" And if a reply was, "sir I do not want to buy it", the commander would roar, "You do not want to buy my lice? You stupid idiot, what is wrong with my lice? Buy it or I kill you."

The commander therefore sold the lice to the passers-by for a huge amount of money. The traveller keeps the lice only for a short distance controlling his disgust and when confident that the commander is no longer watching, he would throw it away, only to be stopped a short distance later by the commander and be interrogated further. "Hey what did you do with my lice?" the commander would shout. "I threw it away sir". "Did you really?" "Yes". "You did very wrong you idiot. I think that I sold my lice for such a small sum to you. You have cheated me to agree to give it to you for almost nothing. Now you either return my lice or pay ten fold more."

And now what is more shocking is the monopoly of power. In the eyes of Allah they are all equal but some are much more equal than others. No doubt that there are a number of ministers not belonging to the Northern Alliance, but the power of these ministers is only symbolic. While I was there until September of the year 2002 the Minister of culture Mr Makhdom had no authority over the Chief of Kabul Radio and Television. While Mr Makhdom encourages the participation of women in radio television, the Chief of Radio, a fundamentalist Northern Alliance fighter, ignores that and issues his own home-made-fatwas and no women singer or artist performs on radio or television. Another story relates the prevailing culture, the story unfolds that in the past a man became the King of Afghanistan. The new king distributed power among his friends and his friends became ministers and governors. Unfortunately one of his very close friends was forgotten by the new king. The close friend complained bitterly that he did not have a significant post in the new king's administration. The king laughed and said, my dear friend you will be my watchman. Your job title may be watchman but you have my permission and power to slap the face of any minister that upsets you. There are so many watchmen like these in the new regime. The most powerful are those from Panjshir. Don't be a minister but be a watchman from Panjshir. That job is more powerful.

There are some sign of optimism such as seeing girls and boys going back to school. I travelled to Bamyan and was astonished to see my people still living in the dark caves. I was even more surprised to see the same people sending their children to schools. They know that most of the atrocities that happened in the country were related to lack of knowledge and education. UNICEF had predicted that only 1.5 million children would get back to school but the reality was much more optimistic with an estimated figures of some 4.5 million children attending schools by the summer of 2002. However, such an Afghan cultural revolution is not all successful because the enthusiasm of the people is not matched with the government's support. UNICEF and the government of Afghanistan have had the capacity perhaps to provide no more than very basic facilities for perhaps 50% of the 1.5 million targeted school children. Some remote areas such as Bamyan do not get any support. The schools that! have been damaged are not repaired. Even UNICEF massages its figures by claiming that the organisation has rehabilitated a thousand schools. The reality is that much of UNICEF's engagement is cosmetic and for the sake of statistics, such as counting simply the replacement of a single door or minor repair in the name of reconstruction or in the more successful project cases the building of five classrooms for an area which require at least thirty-two. By manipulating the reality such organisations show in the release of their public information that they have single-handedly managed to meet most of the educational demands in Afghanistan, but the truth is different. Moreover, the warlords of the country do not allow the teachers to get their salaries. Teachers' salary paid by the UN does not reach them. The warlords control provinces and warlords fraudulently retain the salaries. Teachers are powerless and have not received their salary for a long, long time in a system with! no accountability.

I am deeply worried for the welfare of our children. There are a large number of children on the streets. Child labour is also very common. Children abuse cannot be ignored when there is extreme poverty. I have seen beautiful girls and boys begging on the street. I have seen children collecting food from garbage. I have seen children being chased by the new regime police and beaten up.

Social problems are ignored by the mullahs supported by Mujahideen. I was there when a bomb planted in a car killed more than 30 people, including three brothers who were the sole breadwinners of a big family. For many days I was listening to the mullahs to hear any word of condemnation but there was none. The mullahs were delivering speeches on qurbani(slaughter) of animals in Eid. I found life to be so cheap in my country.

Afghanistan has a few new-rich people. There are streets in Wazir Akbar Khan, the most looked after area of Kabul which now belong to Northern Alliance ministers. Fahim the defence minister has bought the whole street and blocked it for his own safety. His soldiers would not allow any body including pedestrians to walk on that street. Each of those houses at least has a value of 400,000 dollars. Thanks to Fahim and his friends destroying much of Kabul and maintaining only select areas of Wazir Akbar Khan and Shehre Naw, has forced the value of the houses upwards even to the extent of being more expensive than England. The lions of Panjsheer know very well how to get rich from wars. Yes destroy half of the country then, confiscating some houses from their owners in those parts that are not destroyed. That is the way to become rich. Becoming rich like this does not require qualification. Becoming a minister in Afghanistan does not need qualification either.

Whatever is considered to have been changed, one thing that has not changed at all is the rights of women. Muslim extremist do not recognise the rights of women. In my office where I was working women came to the office with fear. Their fear was not in

their imaginations. People like Gulbudin Hekmatyar are there to throw acid on the faces of those women who appear on the street wearing modest chador but not burqa (veil). One of my female colleagues wanted to go to another country for training provided by the UN. The day she went to the passport office was one of her worst humiliating moments, this in the hand of a fundamentalist mullah who was in charge of the passport processing. He simply told the woman that she was a prostitute to be working in an office. However, being a prostitute and begging on the streets is not a problem. The extremists love to see poverty. They were the same people who sold the Afghan women to Arab fundamentalists. People still talk about the shameful act of Taliban when they went and destroyed all Shomali, killed men and took all the women, put them in buses and sent them to Pakistan where the Arabs on the other side received them. Where was the Afghan nang (honour)? Where was their Islam spirit at that time? It shows clearly that Islam has been misused by the Taliban and by the Mujahideen. It is a self made Islam for protecting the interest of uneducated and backward extremist. It is not the real Islam.

Life is very cheap in my country. Frustrated Americans who have failed to find Osama or the real al-qaeda, bomb the wedding parties. I read the reports on the internet but no action is taken visibly or otherwise, by anybody to stop these crimes. I hear that it is the Northern Alliance guiding the Americans to bomb the Pushtoon villages. I just feel sorry for my people and then again, I know very well the stories of the Americans bombings in Cambodia and in Vietnam. The Americans are not in Afghanistan because they love the Afghans. They are there for their own interest and they use the Northern Alliance who has a very poor human rights record. The American humanitarian support to Afghans is the bombing of poor villages. Their record shows heavy spending in Afghanistan but not for the construction of schools and hospitals. It is mainly their war efforts. Regan is back again in Afghanistan in the disguise of Bush. His cowboys this time do not fight the Russians but the al-qaeda. Who is paying for it is simply the poor Afghan masses. I know that Osama is going to emerge again in a different form and name, discretely supported by the USA. I know that, don't we all.

The turbans have changed to pakols, but the heads are covered with the same mentality. The headgear is there not to allow the old fundamentalism to evaporate. My country's fall has not slowed or changed but only the appearance. The beards are trimmer, but the smell of fanaticism coming from unwanted hair is very strong indeed.

=====
**Some of the opinions expressed within articles sent to our list,
may not necessarily be that of RAWA.**
=====

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)
Mailing Address: RAWA, P.O.Box 374, Quetta, Pakistan
Mobile: 0092-300-8551638
Fax: 001-760-2819855
E-mail: rawa@rawa.org
Home Page: <http://www.rawa.org>
Mirror site: <http://rawa.fancymarketing.net>