

kings in one land. Who is in charge here – the government or Fazlullah?’

But we still believed in peace. Everyone was looking forward to a big outdoor public meeting on 20 April when Sufi Mohammad would address the people of Swat.

We were all at home that morning. My father and brothers were standing outside when a group of teenage Taliban went past playing victory songs on their mobiles. ‘Oh look at them, *Aba*,’ said Khushal. ‘If I had a Kalashnikov I would kill them.’

It was a perfect spring day. Everyone was excited because they hoped Sufi Mohammad would proclaim peace and victory and ask the Taliban to lay down their arms. My father didn’t attend the gathering. He watched it from the roof of Sarosh Academy, the school run by his friend Ahmad Shah where he and other activists often gathered in the evenings. The roof overlooked the stage so some media had set up their cameras there.

There was a huge crowd – between 30,000 and 40,000 people – wearing turbans and singing Taliban and jihadi songs. ‘It was complete Talibanisation humming,’ said my father. Liberal progressives like him did not enjoy the singing and chanting. They thought it was toxic, especially at times like this.

Sufi Mohammad was sitting on the stage with a long queue of people waiting to pay homage. The meeting started with recitations from the Chapter of Victory – a *surah* from the Quran – followed by speeches from different leaders in the five districts of our valley – Kohistan, Malakand, Shangla, Upper Dir and Lower Dir. They were all very enthusiastic as each one was hoping to be made the *amir* of their district so they could be in charge of imposing *shariat*. Later these leaders would be killed or thrown in jail, but back then they dreamed of power. So everyone spoke with great authority, celebrating like the Prophet when he conquered Mecca, though his speech was one of forgiveness not cruel victory.

Then it was Sufi Mohammad’s turn. He was not a good speaker. He was very old and seemed in poor health and rambled on for forty-five minutes. He said totally unexpected things as if he had someone else’s tongue in his mouth. He described Pakistan’s courts as un-Islamic and said, ‘I consider Western democracy a system imposed on us by the infidels. Islam does not allow democracy or elections.’

Sufi Mohammad said nothing about education. He didn’t tell the Taliban to lay down their arms and leave the *hujras*. Instead he appeared to threaten the whole nation. ‘Now wait, we are coming to Islamabad,’ he shouted.

We were shocked. It was like when you pour water onto a blazing fire – the flames are suddenly extinguished. People were bitterly disappointed and started abusing him. ‘What did that devil say?’ people asked. ‘He’s not for peace; he wants more killing.’ My mother put it best. ‘He had the chance to be the hero of history but didn’t take it,’ she said. Our mood on the way home was the exact opposite of what we had felt on the way to the meeting.

That night my father spoke on Geo TV and told Kamran Khan that people had had high hopes but were disappointed. Sufi Mohammad didn’t do what he should have done. He was supposed to seal the peace deal with a speech calling for reconciliation and an end to violence.

People had different conspiracy theories about what had happened. Some said Sufi Mohammad had gone mad. Others said he had been ordered to deliver this speech and been warned, ‘If you don’t, there are four or five suicide bombers who will blast you and everyone there.’ People said he had looked uneasy on stage before he spoke. They muttered about hidden hands and unseen forces. *What*