

In 2002 Musharraf held elections for ‘controlled democracy’. They were strange elections as the main party leaders Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto were in exile. In our province these elections brought what we called a ‘mullah government’ to power. The Muttahida Majlis e-Amal (MMA) alliance was a group of five religious parties including the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), which ran the madrasas where the Taliban were trained. People jokingly referred to the MMA as the Mullah Military Alliance and said they got elected because they had Musharraf’s support. But some people supported them because the very religious Pashtuns were angry at the American invasion of Afghanistan and the removal of the Taliban from power there.

Our area had always been more conservative than most of the rest of Pakistan. During the Afghan jihad many madrasas had been built, most of them funded by Saudi money, and many young men had passed through them as it was free education. That was the start of what my father calls the ‘Arabisation’ of Pakistan. Then 9/11 had made this militancy more mainstream. Sometimes when I walked along the main road I saw chalked messages on the sides of buildings. CONTACT US FOR JIHAD TRAINING, they would say, listing a phone number to call. In those days jihadi groups were free to do whatever they wanted. You could see them openly collecting contributions and recruiting men. There was even a headmaster from Shangla who would boast that his greatest success was to send ten boys in Grade 9 for jihad training in Kashmir.

The MMA government banned CD and DVD shops and wanted to create a morality police like the Afghan Taliban had set up. The idea was they would be able to stop a woman accompanied by a man and require her to prove that the man was her relative. Thankfully, our supreme court stopped this. Then MMA activists launched attacks on cinemas and tore down billboards with pictures of women or blacked them out with paint. They even snatched female mannequins from clothing shops. They harassed men wearing Western-style shirts and trousers instead of the traditional shalwar kamiz and insisted women cover their heads. It was as though they wanted to remove all traces of womankind from public life.

My father’s high school opened in 2003. That first year they had boys and girls together, but by 2004 the climate had changed so it was unthinkable to have girls and boys in the same class. That changing climate made Ghulamullah bold. One of the school clerks told my father that the *mufti* kept coming into school and demanding why we girls were still using the main entrance. He said that one day, when a male member of staff took a female teacher out to the main road to get a rickshaw, the *maulana* asked, ‘Why did this man escort her to the road, is he her brother?’

‘No,’ replied the clerk, ‘he is a colleague.’

‘That is wrong!’ said the *maulana*.

My father told the clerk to call him next time he saw the *maulana*. When the call came, my father and the Islamic studies teacher went out to confront him.

‘*Maulana*, you have driven me to the wall!’ my father said. ‘Who are you? You are crazy! You need to go to a doctor. You think I enter the school and take my clothes off? When you see a boy and a girl you see a scandal. They are schoolchildren. I think you should go and see Dr Haider Ali!’

Dr Haider Ali was a well-known psychiatrist in our area, so to say, ‘Shall we take you to Dr Haider Ali?’ meant ‘Are you mad?’

The *mufti* went quiet. He took off his turban and put it in my father’s lap. For us a turban is a public symbol of chivalry and Pashtunness, and for a man to lose his turban is considered a great humiliation. But then he started up again. ‘I never said those things to your clerk. He is lying.’