mentor Akbar Khan, who although he had not gone to college himself lent my father money so he could. Like my mother, Akbar Khan may not have had much of a formal education, but he had another kind of wisdom. My father often spoke of the kindness of Akbar Khan and Nasir Pacha to illustrate that if you help someone in need you might also receive unexpected aid.

My father arrived at college at an important moment in Pakistan's history. That summer, while he was walking in the mountains, our dictator General Zia was killed in a mysterious plane crash, which many people said was caused by a bomb hidden in a crate of mangoes. During my father's first term at college national elections were held, which were won by Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the prime minister who had been executed when my father was a boy. Benazir was our first female prime minister and the first in the Islamic world. Suddenly there was a lot of optimism about the future.

Student organisations which had been banned under Zia became very active. My father quickly got involved in student politics and became known as a talented speaker and debater. He was made general secretary of the Pakhtoon Students Federation (PSF), which wanted equal rights for Pashtuns. The most important jobs in the army, bureaucracy and government are all taken by Punjabis because they come from the biggest and most powerful province.

The other main student organisation was Islami Jamaat-e-Talaba, the student wing of the religious party Jamaat-e-Islami, which was powerful in many universities in Pakistan. They provided free textbooks and grants to students but held deeply intolerant views and their favourite pastime was to patrol universities and sabotage music concerts. The party had been close to General Zia and done badly in the elections. The president of the students' group in Jehanzeb College was Ihsan ul-Haq Haqqani. Though he and my father were great rivals, they admired each other and later became friends. Haqqani says he is sure my father would have been president of the PSF and become a politician if he had been from a rich khan family. Student politics was all about debating and charisma, but party politics required money.

One of their most heated debates in that first year was over a novel. The book was called *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, and it was a parody of the Prophet's life set in Bombay. Muslims widely considered it blasphemous and it provoked so much outrage that it seemed people were talking of little else. The odd thing was no one had even noticed the publication of the book to start with – it wasn't actually on sale in Pakistan – but then a series of articles appeared in Urdu newspapers by a mullah close to our intelligence service, berating the book as offensive to the Prophet and saying it was the duty of good Muslims to protest. Soon mullahs all over Pakistan were denouncing the book, calling for it to be banned, and angry demonstrations were held. The most violent took place in Islamabad on 12 February 1989, when American flags were set alight in front of the American Centre – even though Rushdie and his publishers were British. Police fired into the crowd, and five people were killed. The anger wasn't just in Pakistan. Two days later Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, issued a fatwa calling for Rushdie's assassination.

My father's college held a heated debate in a packed room. Many students argued that the book should be banned and burned and the fatwa upheld. My father also saw the book as offensive to Islam but believes strongly in freedom of speech. 'First, let's read the book and then why not respond with our own book,' he suggested. He ended by asking in a thundering voice my grandfather would have been proud of, 'Is Islam such a weak religion that it cannot tolerate a book written against it? Not *my* Islam!'