

Iftikhar, stormed the control tower at Karachi so that Musharraf's plane could land. Musharraf then seized power and threw Sharif into a dungeon in Attock Fort. Some people celebrated by handing out sweets as Sharif was unpopular, but my father cried when he heard the news. He had thought we were done with military dictatorships. Sharif was accused of treason and only saved by his friends in the Saudi royal family, who arranged his exile.

Musharraf was our fourth military ruler. Like all our dictators, he started by addressing the nation on TV, beginning, '*Mere aziz hamwatano*' – 'My dear countrymen' – then went into a long tirade against Sharif, saying that under him Pakistan had 'lost our honour, dignity and respect'. He vowed to end corruption and go after those 'guilty of plundering and looting the national wealth'. He promised he would make his own assets and tax return public. He said he would only run the country for a short time, but no one believed him. General Zia had promised to be in power for ninety days and had stayed more than eleven years until he was killed in an air crash.

It's the same old story, my father said, and he was right. Musharraf promised to end the old feudal system by which the same few dozen families controlled our entire country, and bring fresh young clean faces into politics. Instead his cabinet was made up of the very same old faces. Once again our country was expelled from the Commonwealth and became an international black sheep. The Americans had already suspended most aid the year before when we conducted nuclear tests, but now almost everyone boycotted us.

With such a history, you can see why the people of Swat did not always think it was a good idea to be part of Pakistan. Every few years Pakistan sent us a new deputy commissioner, or DC, to govern Swat, just as the British had done in colonial days. It seemed to us that these bureaucrats came to our province simply to get rich, then went back home. They had no interest in developing Swat. Our people are used to being subservient because under the wali no criticism was tolerated. If anyone offended him, their entire family could be expelled from Swat. So when the DCs came from Pakistan, they were the new kings and no one questioned them. Older people often looked back nostalgically to the days of the last wali. Back then, they said, the mountains were all still covered in trees, there were schools every five kilometres and the wali sahib would visit them in person to resolve problems.

After what happened with Safina, I vowed that I would never treat a friend badly again. My father always says it's important to treat friends well. When he was at college and had no money for food or books many of his friends helped him out and he never forgot that. I have three good friends – Safina from my area, Sumbul from the village and Moniba from school. Moniba had become my best friend in primary school when we lived near each other, and I persuaded her to come to our school. She is a wise girl, though we often fall out, particularly when we go on school trips. She comes from a large family with three sisters and four brothers. I think of her as my big sister even though I am six months older than her. Moniba sets down rules which I try to follow. We don't have secrets from each other and we don't share our secrets with anyone else. She doesn't like me talking to other girls and says we must be careful of associating with people who are badly behaved or have a reputation for trouble. She always says, 'I have four brothers, and if I do even the slightest thing wrong they can stop me going to school.'

I was so eager not to disappoint my parents that I ran errands for anyone. One day our neighbours asked me to buy some maize for them from the bazaar. On the way a boy on a bicycle crashed into me and my left shoulder hurt so much that my eyes watered. But I still went and bought the maize, took it to my neighbours and then went home. Only then did I cry. Shortly after that I found the perfect way to