

My father could listen no more. ‘Maryam is mentioned everywhere in the Quran. Was she not a woman and a good woman at that?’

‘No,’ said the mullah. ‘She is only there to prove that Isa [Jesus] was the son of Maryam, not the son of God!’

‘That may be,’ replied my father. ‘But I am pointing out that the Quran names Maryam.’

The *mufti* started to object but my father had had enough. Turning to the group, he said, ‘When this gentleman passes me on the street, I look to him and greet him but he doesn’t answer, he just bows his head.’

The mullah looked down embarrassed because greeting someone properly is important in Islam. ‘You run the *haram* school,’ he said. ‘That’s why I don’t want to greet you.’

Then one of the other men spoke up. ‘I’d heard you were an infidel,’ he said to my father, ‘but there are Qurans in your room.’

‘Of course there are!’ replied my father, astonished that his faith would be questioned. ‘I am a Muslim.’

‘Let’s get back to the subject of the school,’ said the *mufti*, who could see the discussion was not going his way. ‘There are men in the reception area of the school, and they see the girls enter, and this is very bad.’

‘I have a solution,’ said my father. ‘The school has another gate. The girls will enter through that.’

The mullah clearly wasn’t happy as he wanted the school closed altogether. But the elders were happy with this compromise and they left.

My father suspected this would not be the end of the matter. What we knew and they didn’t was that the *mufti*’s own niece attended the school in secret. So a few days later my father called the *mufti*’s elder brother, the girl’s father.

‘I am very tired of your brother,’ he said. ‘What kind of mullah is he? He’s driving us crazy. Can you help to get him off our backs?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t help you, Ziauddin,’ he replied. ‘I have trouble in my home too. He lives with us and has told his wife that she must observe purdah from us and that our wives must observe purdah from him, all in this small space. Our wives are like sisters to him and his is like a sister to us, but this madman has made our house a hell. I am sorry but I can’t help you.’

My father was right to think this man was not going to give up – mullahs had become more powerful figures since Zia’s rule and campaign of Islamisation.

In some ways General Musharraf was very different from General Zia. Though he usually dressed in uniform, he occasionally wore Western suits and he called himself chief executive instead of chief martial law administrator. He also kept dogs, which we Muslims regard as unclean. Instead of Zia’s Islamisation he began what he called ‘enlightened moderation’. He opened up our media, allowing new private TV channels and female newsreaders, as well as showing dancing on television. The celebration of Western holidays such as Valentine’s Day and New Year’s Eve was allowed. He even sanctioned an annual pop concert on the eve of Independence Day, which was broadcast to the nation. He did something which our democratic rulers hadn’t, even Benazir, and abolished the law that for a woman to prove she was raped, she had to produce four male witnesses. He appointed the first woman governor of the state bank and the first women airline pilots and coastguards. He even announced we would have female guards at Jinnah’s tomb in Karachi.

However in our Pashtun homeland of the North-West Frontier Province things were very different.