

Afghanistan - Kabul Diaries Part 14: 'Our privacy is now subjected to Taliban vigilantes'

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Protest in solidarity with Afghan women in New York City on September 25.

It is difficult to catch up with old friends these days, whether it's meeting them or calling them up. Life in Kabul, as well as outside of Kabul, is on a stand still since the Taliban occupation.

Women largely stay at home; they try not to leave their homes, not only because they have been told by the Taliban, but they are also scared of being beaten and humiliated for just being women in a country run by the medieval Taliban.

Post-9/11, despite the suicide attacks and bombings, life in Kabul and other major cities improved for women. Women started going to universities, work and would enjoy a calm evening in a number of cafes that opened in the heart of Kabul city or other big cities around the country. One of the places frequented by young Afghan women (and men) was Bowling Alley. There was a café at Bowling Alley which had music and the youth would enjoy relaxing evenings or weekends there.

Aye Khanum, Adam-o-Hawa (Adam and Eve) were also popular with Kabul's youth. They would swarm these cafes for tea and coffee with friends and colleagues. Some of these cafes would even host poetry recitals and cultural nights. Despite the chaos in the country, the youth had an escape, to a relaxing evening and to passionate discussion of politics, the insecurity, women's rights, civil rights and films.

Wedding parties are common occasions for family outings. There are more than 150 wedding halls, which would host lavish wedding parties. Women would dress up in the latest designs available. They would spend hours at the beauty parlours, which had sprung up around the city, before arriving at the wedding parties.

Some weddings had up to 1000 guests, or more. Unfortunately, a lot of money would be spent on these weddings, but at the same time that was also one of the few occasions where men and women — though in separate halls — would enjoy music, dance and good food.

A status symbol to hold wedding parties in was Hotel Serena. Recently, Serena has been making headlines because [Pakistan Intelligence Agency] ISI chief, General Hamid Faiz, was spotted there.

Also, fiery Indian anchorperson Arnab Goswami, (in)famous for his ultra-right-wing views, earned a lot of ridicule for misreporting about Serena. However, Serena is not only a sweet memory for many local families, because of weddings, but it was also a venue for cultural events, press conferences and NGO meetings.

Kabul, and other cities, also provided such opportunities and facilities such as gyms and swimming pools for women. All of them have gone out of business since August 15.

A friend of mine, whose identity will be kept anonymous, recently had a traumatic experience. Her sister's wedding shows how life has changed for Kabul residents.

[She said] "I am having panic attacks. At times, I find it hard to breathe. The loneliness of not having a friend in these difficult times is difficult. My thoughts drift to a few months back, life was good even if it was not the best."

She continued to narrate a horrifying story from a few days back. During our conversation, she broke down many times and I could sense the overwhelming burden on her, as she would gasp for air and say sorry every time she stopped to breathe deeply. Below is what she narrated:

"A few days back it was my sister's wedding. We postponed it when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Since the security situation is deteriorating, my family decided that the wedding should take place.

"The in-laws of my sister insisted on henna night. [Usually an ebullient night before the wedding, female friends and relatives come together and dance and paint henna on the hands of the bride to be. It's usually a fun filled night for women.]"We agreed on the terms that it would be a hush-hush affair, no dancing or music. We were scared of the Taliban. The henna was brought and they quietly painted the bride's hands. When they went out, some of the women started playing the tambourine and a few kids used firecrackers. Within minutes, the Taliban arrived. Fortunately, my sister's in-laws had left.

"The Taliban were furious and threatened that they would search every house in the area. Without a second thought, I asked my brother to leave the house, he jumped from the window and escaped. I knew they would take him away just for a simple reason of having a celebration at home."I have seen how the Taliban have beaten people since they have come back to power, for anything which seemed a bit out of place. The Taliban were calling us drunkards and other rude names. I don't feel comfortable repeating all that. I changed my clothes to a simple dress and was waiting for them to enter the home.

"Our neighbours begged the Taliban, told them that it was a henna night and that we were a good Muslim family. Still they demanded that my brother should come out. Thankfully, our neighbours managed the situation and calmed down the Taliban after three-hour long negotiations, which felt forever."We held the wedding very quietly, as we were scared the Taliban might enter and beat us all for wearing western clothes. There was no music and we only had the Nikah ceremony."

She kept crying after narrating the ordeal. When she calmed down, she added, "Afghan people have lost their free will. We are being dictated on everything, even our very private matters are now being controlled by the Taliban. On the day of judgement, I am sure God will send Afghans to heaven because we have witnessed hell in Afghanistan."

There are reports of Taliban entering weddings and inspecting what people are wearing and if music is being played. The Taliban have already banned music and women have largely started wearing burqas, and only a couple of brave women are still defying the Taliban by wearing jeans but covering

their heads with scarves.

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P.S.

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<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/kabul-diaries-part-14-our-privacy-now-subjected-taliban-vigilantes>