

## Laal Kabul Diary

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Vol. 48, Issue No. 30, 27 Jul, 2013

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Known for its revolutionary songs and radical politics, Laal a Pakistani music band toured Kabul in June 2013, on the invitation of the left-wing Solidarity Party of Afghanistan. In his diary Taimur Rehman, its lead vocalist, recounts the horror of seeing the city under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) occupation, the hostile attitude of the Afghans towards Pakistanis, and his surprise at the thriving rock music scene in small enclaves in the city.

### June 22

#### **An Optimistic Start**

Laal's trip to Kabul started on a buoyant and an optimistic note. The questions that were top most in my mind were to find out about peoples' reaction to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) occupation and the Taliban, and their attitude towards Pakistan. As a researcher, I was already aware that my own opinions were shaped by my own experiences as a Pakistani, and I had to make an effort to see things from the point of view of the Afghans. And secondly that I would only be meeting a small cross-section of people who belonged to interconnected social circles in Kabul. Hence, it would be wise not to make any generalisations about all of Afghanistan based on these experiences.

### June 24

#### **First Day in Kabul**

Finally the big day arrived. With great excitement we set out for the airport. On the plane I sat next to a big Pashtun. After a little while he looked at me and said "Excuse me, but aren't you from the band Laal?" I replied "Yes". I asked him why he was headed to Kabul. He replied that he was a medical doctor from Peshawar, but the recent attacks on Shias had really disturbed him, and he was going to Kabul to see if he could find better and more secure work there. I thought to myself "What does it say about our country that people are migrating in order to simply be more secure?"

Ziad, a friend who was accompanying us to film the visit to Kabul, recorded a short interview on the plane, and before we knew it we were descending to land in Kabul. As the

cabin doors opened, we were greeted with the relatively cool air of Kabul. Just as we were enjoying the breeze, we saw two gigantic grey transport airplanes in the distance. They were coloured in such a way that they seemed to be NATO transport planes. Ziad tried to film us getting off the plane, but he was quickly stopped by security. Now we knew we were really in Afghanistan.

We decided to take a taxi to the hotel, and while making arrangements for it we discovered the peculiar security arrangement at the Kabul airport. Except for a select few, the public was not allowed near the terminal. Passengers had to walk all the way out to the parking lot in order to meet with people. Sure enough at the furthest parking terminal a driver by the name of Nur Muhammed was waiting to pick us up.

### **The NATO Occupation**

It was here that we got our first sight of the occupation. As we made our way to the car which was waiting to pick us up, we saw a group of big burly American soldiers huddled close to their Humvee and some others walking around the area wearing bullet proof vests and literally armed to the teeth. It is difficult for me to put down in words the feeling that overcomes one to see the picture of occupation.

It is one thing to read about an occupation or to see it in the news, but it is entirely another thing to see it with one's own eyes. My thoughts raced to what I had seen and read of Ho Chi Minh. And my respect for him soared to new levels. I thought to myself, these were the troops he fought while representing the poorest of the poor in an oppressed third world country. Afghanistan does not need reactionary, medieval, savage, and ignorant barbarians called the Taliban –who themselves were the products of imperialism. Afghanistan needs a Ho Chi Minh.

### **The Conference**

We arrived at the hotel a short while later and saw massive double iron gates with armed guards that were thoroughly searching every guest that entered. The conference we had come to participate in was on women and fundamentalism in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The participants were a relatively focused group of people from the two countries. Our host –the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan– (SPA) was a secular left-wing party, and this was my first introduction to them. All the speeches by the Afghans were made in Dari; however, thanks to a translator we were able to follow and participate in the discussion. I made a short speech towards the end of the conference that was strongly appreciated.

Unfortunately, aside from Mahvash Waqar of Laal, the Pakistani delegation lacked any women representatives. This was a very serious shortcoming. To add insult to injury, it was only then that the three of us discovered that we had arrived on the last day of the political discussions at the conference. Naturally, this was a source of further embarrassment for our team. Nonetheless, our Afghan hosts, perhaps out of a sense of hospitality, never expressed any criticism or allowed us to feel uncomfortable in any way. On the contrary, they were

thrilled to have us in Afghanistan and greeted us with smiles, hugs, kisses and cheers. Afghan men touch cheek to cheek when they greet. It is a beautiful and a soft gesture in an otherwise brutalised society. Similarly the Afghan women we met boldly thrust their hand forward to shake hands, completely oblivious of the fact that Pakistani men are not accustomed to shaking women's hands.

After the conference, the young participants of the SPA wanted to take us to a rock concert, and we were equally eager to explore Kabul. So after freshening up, we went to Lycée Esteqlal (that is contracted to the French foreign ministry by the Afghan ministry of education). We heard two bands at this concert: Kabul Dreams and Morcha (Ants in Dari). The rock scene in Kabul completely caught us off guard. It was great fun, and it showed that music thrives everywhere. I thought to myself, does this rock scene only exist in these small circles patronised by Western institutions, or is it something that attracts more young people? I simply do not know enough to answer that question. But I can say that wherever it exists, and to whatever extent it thrives, it should be supported.

## **June 25**

### **The Taliban Attack**

The next morning reality came crashing into our lives. The presidential palace and ministry of defence, no more than a few blocks from our hotel, were attacked by the Taliban. I had slept right through the entire episode. I woke up much later to find Mahvash watching TV and she told me about the attacks on the presidential palace and that she could hear the sirens from the window. I peered out of the window and took a few photographs of the building that had been attacked.

We all went up to the roof to get a better look. The view was just spectacular. Not only could one see the whole of Kabul but even the hills beyond. In the distance we saw two black NATO helicopters circling the city. Up high in the sky was a giant white blimp. Afghans say that the blimp monitors all movement in the city, reminding one of George Orwell's 1984.

"What a great place to film our video," we thought. However, our hotel was not only close to the presidential palace but also to several embassies (for instance, I could also see into the courtyards of the Turkish and Iranian embassies). Hence, all photography was strictly prohibited on the rooftop. We tried very hard to get permission but with no result. By now, we had been warned by enough people that unauthorised filming by Pakistanis in a sensitive area on the day of the attack of the presidential palace would, to put it mildly, not be viewed positively by the authorities.

Thankfully our abject failure at filming was broken by the pleasant company of Masood Hasanzaday of Morcha who came to rehearse songs for the show that was scheduled later that evening. We had a very short rehearsal and instead spent most of that time chatting about the political history of Afghanistan. I wanted to know about the left in Afghanistan.

Masood explained that Najeeb's (former president Mohammad Najibullah) government is remembered positively in Afghanistan; particularly, because there was discipline and a strong central state authority. This was viewed positively by Afghans in relation to the anarchic warlordism that followed. He further stated that the Islamic fundamentalist opposition to Najeeb's government was partly based on land issues. He explained that it was principally the communist government's land reforms that had driven the tribal leaders and landlords to join the ranks of the jihad. Hence the jihadist movement, in his opinion, was basically a movement to restore the power of the tribal leaders and landlords.

I asked him about his experiences as a musician. He told us that how he came from a family of musicians, and how he had formed a band in Herat. But after receiving death threats from the religious extremists some members of his band went abroad, while he came to Kabul and formed the band again with new members. In addition to being a musician, he worked as a freelance journalist, and much like our band he wished to use music as a means to communicate progressive ideas.

### **Our First Performance**

A few hours later we headed to Cafe Che for our performance. In the van, a debate arose about whether Cafe Che was named after the great Argentine revolutionary, or if it meant "small Cafe" (Che means small in Dari). Naturally, we argued that it meant what we wanted it to mean, and just for tonight it meant Cafe Che Guevara. This was not the only time we used our "ignorance" of Dari to reinterpret terms in our own way. Cafe Che was Cafe Che Guevara, and Morcha which means ants in Dari was translated as "bunker" (Morcha in Urdu means a bunker for soldiers). We were in high spirits and having great fun with the ambiguity of language.

The response to the performance was fantastic. Though the sound system was quite poor, people thoroughly enjoyed both Laal's and Morcha's performances. Listening to our Punjabi numbers, lots of young people got up and danced joyously. I also used the concert as an opportunity to say all the things I had wanted to say at the conference. I threw caution to the wind and condemned the NATO and Taliban while defending socialist ideals with all the passion at my disposal. It was received with a rapturous applause from the audience. The young owner of the Cafe became a huge fan and went out of his way to give us a royal dinner. While I was packing up, I asked him "Is this Cafe named after Che Guevara." He said "Of course it is". I guess, I will never know whether he just being a loving host, or whether I was right all along.

The three of us celebrated our successful performance in the hotel room by eating mango ice-cream and staying up until wee hours of the morning.

### **June 26**

#### **A Guided Tour**

The conference was now completely over. All the Pakistani delegates had left or were

leaving Kabul. And we had to be moved to an alternative accommodation at a comrade's house. Our SPA comrades seemed a bit concerned for our security (perhaps because of my emotional condemnation of everyone the night before). They deputed three men to guard and guide us in Kabul. One drove the car, one guided our journey, and the third was a strong silent armed-to-the-teeth gunman. I wanted to mention their names because we grew very close to them, but they asked me to not to do so or post their pictures, as it would undermine their security. Their task was to guide us, and I think also to shield us from any adverse incident. As we soon discovered, anti-Pakistan sentiment runs very high in Kabul, and our hosts were keen that we experience only the best of their city. Although they did their best to shield us, nonetheless, we got some sense of public opinion in the following days.

We set out across Kabul with our little entourage to see if we could gather some good footage for our Pak-Afghan solidarity music video.

### **Anti-Pakistani Sentiment**

Our first stop was in front of a house pock-marked with bullet holes. We had hardly begun filming when two men approached us and said something in Dari to our guides. The conversation quickly became heated. We decided to stop shooting and leave to avoid any incident. It turns out that the men had heard us conversing in Urdu and had said to our guides "these Pakistanis should not be filming here because they use these films to plan bomb attacks." Naturally, this remark prompted our guides to come out in our passionate defence.

This hostility to Pakistanis engaging in photography in Kabul was an attitude that we found over and over again. At one point Ziad was filming, while seated inside the car, some children coming out of a school. Suddenly a policeman appeared out of nowhere and tried to grab the camera. He was convinced that we were trying to film the checkpoint close to the children and wanted to confiscate the camera. Frankly, we had not even noticed that there was a checkpoint. Luckily our guides were once again able to extricate us from this situation. We were stopped a third time at another check point, and our car was thoroughly searched for about 15 minutes. The camera was once again at the center of their suspicion. The result was that we could hardly film anything that day. We had simply not anticipated that filming in Kabul would be this difficult.

Though we failed in our photographic ambitions, the day was a singular triumph in terms of exploring Kabul. Our quest for footage had led us nearly all over Kabul by road. The one image that stays with me since that day is that Kabul is choking, literally choking, with barbed wire. There was barbed wire on the roads, check points, houses, hotels, buildings, gates and walls. If Afghanistan was a person, its body would be covered not with soft garments but pierced with barbed wire. And the only respite from the barbed wire was the sight of men with guns in between gigantic concrete slabs acting as blast walls. Let me put it to you this way, in my 38 years of walking this earth, I have never seen so much barbed

wire, so many blast walls and so many guns as I saw in four days in Kabul.

What does this say about the triumphalist rhetoric that comes out of Washington about their role as liberators of Afghanistan?

The other aspect that struck us about Kabul was that contrary to the images of women covered in the blue *burqa* (head to toe garment) that one keeps viewing on television, we saw no more than 5% of women in Kabul wearing the *burqa*. Most women just wore a *dupatta* (*scarf*) covering their heads much like the rest of South Asia. We discovered that this was in part because most of Kabul was now populated by Uzbeks, Hazaras and Tajiks who are not that conservative with respect to women as the Pashtuns. I cannot say anything about *purdah* (veil) in rural areas, but in my experience in Kabul, it was quite the exception.

In the evening, we had two meetings with Aziz Khan, an Afghan film-maker, and Humayun Zadran the owner of a music cafe called "The Other Venue". Humayun turned out to be a friend of my younger brother. He not only invited us to play at his cafe the next day but also invited us to stay at his house for the remainder of our trip. At his cafe, we listened to a mesmerising classical music performance of the viola and cello by Tanya and Robin who are music teachers working in Kabul. One would not expect to find a performance of Western classical music in Kabul, but we discovered that the government had set up an institute within the University of Kabul to teach classical music.

## June 26

### Filming the Music Video

The next day, after breakfast, we resolved to finish our video. There was an overturned Russian-made armoured vehicle that had been lying around for 30 years right in front of the gate of our host. Neighbours told us that it had been destroyed during the Afghan civil-war (one of the most destructive periods in Kabul's history). It was simply too heavy to be lifted, and so this huge metal hulk just sat there, quietly reminding everyone of Afghanistan's war years. We all thought it was an ideal location for the music video we were doing for Afghanistan.

So Mahvash and I sat on top of it, while Ziad began to shoot some performance sequences of our song. Within a few minutes children began to gather around, drawn, in particular, by the sight of my guitar. I invited them to come and play the guitar. One thing led to another, and soon they were not only playing the guitar but also became part of the video. Then we all had a few races and played some good old street football.

Overall, it was a truly wonderful afternoon. All the neighbours encouraged their children to participate, who had a great time laughing and singing. And thanks to all of them we finally managed to film some of the most endearing sequences of our video.

Later that afternoon our hosts took us to Bagh-e Babur of the Mughal fame. Yes, this is the

place where Babur was buried. The garden was a huge contrast to the rest of Kabul. Here in the lush green atmosphere of the garden, we found softness again. Families were sitting and enjoying the weather; young people were walking around enjoying the breeze. There was a big flag of Afghanistan fluttering in the wind. We imagined that all of Kabul must have been green like this at one point in the past. And I am sure a time will come when it will become green again. We shot some great footage from top of the gardens (it ascends along the hill) and were quite pleased with the visit.

## **Jamming with the Crowd**

It was now time to go for our last performance at The Other Venue. Once again Morcha was our backup band. Since this was a smaller venue, we decided that we would play our softer numbers. So we played *Na Honay Pai*, *Loay Loay*, *Umeed e Sahar*, *Ghum Na Kar* and other such numbers. People loved the performance, especially when we sang *Fareeda* and *Sadaa*. We took our bow, but it was not the end. A member of the audience came up and said, "I am a metal drummer, I loved your performance, and I really want to jam with you". Another member jumped up and grabbed the bass guitar. Masood Hasanzaday grabbed an electric guitar. And off we went once again playing popular cover after cover. I got the chance to show off my bluesy lead guitar and, I have to tell you, I have never had so much fun jamming as I did that evening. We played, and played, and played until it was 2 am in the morning. We must have been up on the stage for almost four hours. Our final reward was not only an appreciative audience but an invitation from an Afghan-Norwegian to play in Norway for a music festival in August.

## **June 27**

### **Our Last Supper**

We were so tired from our performances, video shoots, and travelling that we decided to take it easy on the last day of our visit to Kabul. One of our Pakistani comrades Farooq Suleria had invited us for lunch but given our tiredness, we just did not have the energy to follow through. The SPA comrades shot some more footage for us in the early morning. Our guide from the party came over early in the morning and took our camera to get us some superb shots of the city. In the evening he and I lazily walked to the party office (it was only a few blocks away). Instead of running around all over the city, as we had been doing the days before, I thought it would be much nicer to spend time with this young man and learn about his political and intellectual journey (he asked me not to name him due to security concerns). I was much moved learning about his life, and how he was attracted to left wing politics. He gave me a strong sense of hope because he was brimming with the reckless optimism that can only belong to a young person. I identified with his optimism because it is exactly what led me to the left in my own context.

Our last supper was at Humayun's who made the most incredible dessert I have ever tasted. He put the traditional Afghan ice-cream inside a mango cut into a cup shape. I told him that

if he were ever to bring this concoction to Pakistan he would become a millionaire. We played more music till late in the evening. All in all, the evening was a soft mellow end to an amazing trip.

## **June 28**

### **A Farewell to Kabul**

In the morning we took a taxi to the airport. Being born and bred as South Asians, naturally we had to do everything at the last minute. But we had not anticipated just how much time it would take for us to clear the airport security checks. A typical passenger has to go through at least four full security checks to make it to their flight.

There was such a rush of people at the international departures terminal that all lines broke down. One big American with tattoos on his arms asked someone, "Am I in the wrong line?" To which Ziad Zafar remarked under his breath "No buddy, you are in the wrong country". The Afghan standing next to Ziad misinterpreted that and said "Why are you calling our country wrong". Another one joined him, saying "Wrong people always find the country wrong". "You must respect every country" remarked the first. Was this last incident a metaphor for the relations between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US, I asked myself as we boarded our plane back to Pakistan? I certainly hope not.