



A discussion with Haroon Ullah

Q: You were born in the United States to South Asian immigrants and grew up in a small rural community in eastern Washington State. You then went on to study international policy at Harvard Kennedy School and later took a position with the U.S. State Department. How did your childhood influence your desire to deepen American's understanding of Pakistan and its culture?

A. I always grew up with a curiosity of what was happening around the world, especially in South Asia. My first trip to Pakistan was when I was five years old—I have vivid memories of the colorful bazaars and the smell of the tasty treats from food vendors. I remember our dentist and good family friend, Dr. Christenson asking me about South Asia during my visits to him. He would say, "What the heck is going on in Pakistan? It darns seems to me like the Soviet Union forty years ago". I didn't have a good answer to his question—but I badly wanted to know more and that planted a seed in me to travel and learn. I felt I could navigate between the two cultures, as an American with South Asian heritage.

Q: How did you meet the Reza family and discover their incredible story? How did you get the Rezas to trust you so intimately during such a time of turmoil for their family?

A. I met the family in 2004, while doing research on the military in Pakistan. I was at a dinner party at a friend's place and overheard Awais talking about his military experience and POW days. I was intrigued by his account and asked to follow up with him. Awais loved to talk about his unique experience. When I followed up with him over lunch, I was amazed at how much courage and tenacity Awais had as a POW. He was proud of his background and he never wanted to give up. He was a self-made person.

But even more amazing was hearing about those years from Shez. She remained hopeful during the time Awais was a POW and feared dead. She was the rock that held the family together then—foreboding what would continue in later years as well.

And I got to know Shez and the family over the usual way you get to know someone deeply in Pakistan—by eating mangoes with them! There is no clean way to eat a mango, so it can be a real ice breaker. It is messy, slippery, and the juices go everywhere (I used to honestly wear a bib the first few times I tried eating a mango!). When you are eating the mango, there is something about your inhibitions that go out the window. And there is something special sharing that with someone—it builds trust and a familiarity. I would have the best conversations with Shez, Awais and the boys eating a case of mangoes during the late evening hours. .

Q: The book is written in a vivid narrative style—one that could be mistaken for fiction—yet it's a true story. Talk about your research and how you were able to piece together the events in the book in such an atmospheric way while remaining painstakingly accurate and careful in your research and reporting.

A. In my several years living in Pakistan, I conducted hundreds of interviews with the family, community members, and friends to garner accurate accounts of the events. In addition, I became close with the Reza family during my time in Lahore and was able to build a long-term relationship with them. Trust

was key. Without that, it would have been difficult to get their candid views and thoughts about the events. I hold that very dearly.

Q: Most Americans' experience with Pakistan is through news headlines—geopolitical reports of suicide bombings, extremism, and the country's role in the global terrorism. In *The Bargain from the Bazaar*, you dive deep beyond the headlines and bring into sharp focus an ordinary middle-class family and humanize their experience. Talk about your decision to write about this one family. How do you hope this influences the readers' understanding of Pakistan?

A. I imagined Pakistan to be full of chaos and a country that might be out of the middle ages, something I might see in *Lord of the Rings* or like District 11 in *Hunger Games*. I couldn't imagine how everyday people were able to survive the chaos. The Rezas showed me something different—a new side of Pakistan I had never imagined. The beauty, the colors, the free spirit of movement despite all the violence and attacks. I wanted to bring to life the Pakistan that I saw and experienced. I wanted to bring that dinner table conversation to middle class people I grew up with in America's heartland.

Q: Awais Reza's three sons—Salman, Daniyal, and Kamran—embark on very different life paths. How are these men emblematic of Pakistani society today?

A. Each of the sons, in their unique way, has to take ownership for their choices, whether good or bad. This is one of the keys to *The Bargain from the Bazaar*—the paths that each of us choose, that unique journey.

I identify most with Kamran because he represents a vibrant energy among young people filled with curiosity, determination and a hopeful future. Kamran sees all the chaos around him and still remains hopeful to work towards a more pluralistic and hopeful future. He doesn't let events get him down. I was heartened to see how he responded.

Q: During this time of turmoil for the Rezas, there were so many opportunities for the family to fracture. Yet Awais and Shez remain committed to their sons—especially Dani. And the brothers—despite their differences in life choices and frustrations with one another's decisions—maintain a foundation of love and care for one another. How did they not allow this incredibly dark experience tear the family apart?

A. The family showed tremendous resilience and courage. It taught something important about how to keep on going on, day to day—digging deep down to keep hopeful about the next day and not fall completely apart. I know that I would have shriveled when facing those types of hurdles, but they did not. I think they truly believed that it was their responsibility to their community, family and city. Lahore is a proud place and the Rezas represent, what everyday folks keep on saying, "If you haven't seen Lahore, you haven't seen the world". Lahoris are proud of their courage and resilience.

Q: Talk about the women in this story—particularly Shez and Rania. Though they don't take center stage in this story, they play an important role, as both are bucking societal norms and expectations. Can you

tell us more about these strong women and how they represent—or don't represent—women in Pakistan today.

A. Shez and Rania are exemplary. Shez remains the rock of the family, the quiet strength that holds the core together. Rania is a strong, smart, ambitious young woman—and I met hundreds of Ranias when I was in Pakistan. I do think she is representative of the new generation—women now make up a higher percentage in certain graduate schools (like medical school). While there remain huge challenges in women's education, particularly in rural areas—look no further than Malala Yousafzai's story—I do believe Shez and Rania represent the core of strong women that make South Asian society.

Rania continues to blossom and represents a new class of working woman that continues to make its mark in policy and advocacy circles. Young women like Rania want to see change. They are tired of hearing excuses about why things are always the same.

Q: After reading this incredible story, the reader gets a sense that the destiny of Pakistan lies in the hands of the country's younger generations—perhaps more than ever before. Do you agree? Why? How will young people shape the future of Pakistan?

A. The younger generation is absolutely the key to the future. Over 60% of Pakistan is under the age of 30 and the country has over 110 million young people. They are full of energy, looking for opportunity and restless. I believe in a small way, the Reza brothers and Rania represent the spectrum of youth in Pakistan.

I meet so many young people like Rania, Kamran and Malala Yousafzai who make me optimistic about Pakistan's future. The young people are so vibrant. They are full of hope. Despite seeing all the challenges around them, they soldier on, making the best of their circumstances. They turn the difficult circumstances into opportunities— to seek creative answers, think 'outside the box' and look for fresh ways to accomplish their goals. As an American, I feel incredibly blessed to have grown up with so much opportunity—it leaves me in even more awe of what young people in Pakistan accomplish against all odds.

Q: Talk about the Reza family today—have they read the book? What has their reaction to the book been? What are their lives like today?

A. Yes, the Rezas have followed the book closely—they had read various scripts and I wanted to make sure they signed off on everything we put in the manuscript. They were glad their story was told and at times it was difficult to read, as they were reliving many of the ups and downs the family went through. Today they remain as resilient as ever and continue to have faith in a better Pakistan. It always leaves me amazed how cautiously optimistic they remain.

I feel like I am part of the Reza family, as someone that has been accepted into their extended family. I look forward to traveling to Pakistan, where I can catch up with the whole family. We are all on separate journeys that connect from time to time. I realized living in Pakistan that our worlds are

interconnected—what happens in Pakistan affects us in the United States and what happens in the United States affects people in Pakistan.

Q: What was your most memorable moment during your time in Pakistan?

A. It came at the most unusual of times. I was in Anarkali Bazaar, as I would often spend time perusing the bazaar and enjoying the sights and smells. I was sitting on a wooden box, catching my breath during the intense heat of the mid-day afternoon. Temperatures routinely get to 120 degrees and you can feel the sweat being pulled out of you. As I was plotting which fresh juice stand to visit next, I heard a song playing in the background. The melody was familiar. *Could this be American country music?* I thought. *In the middle of the oldest bazaar in Pakistan?* At first, I thought I might be light headed, given the heat and the fact that I missed home quite a bit while traveling. But the song continued—I knew the song because it was Garth Brooks and my family grew up listening to country music.

My younger brother Muneer, who was born with Downs Syndrome and a congenital heart defect, spent many years in Children’s Hospital in Seattle. Country music was the one thing that soothed him. We all embraced the melodic music because of Muneer. And now, half a world away in an almost ancient part of Pakistan, I hear Garth Brooks singing “The Dance.” To make sure, I walked around the stalls nearby trying to see exactly where the music was coming from. And indeed I found a small stall where the owner had his CD player in and Garth Brooks was belting out lyrics. I asked the owner if he knew what song he was playing, but he gave me a funny look and continued cleaning his store. It was at the moment, I knew that my worlds had collided. My heart was smiling.

This moment truly reinforced for me the idea that we are all interconnected in this world—to view Pakistani families like the Rezas as so different from your own family here in America is to overlook fundamental similarities between all of us as humans. The world is much smaller than we think and our actions—both in Pakistan and in the US exists in a vacuum.

Q: What ultimate message would you like the reader to take away from the book?

A. For me, the main message is one of resilience. In the face of seemingly unending hurdles, everyday people in Pakistan have found a way to persevere—they remain unbroken by heartbreaking events around them. It taught me a lot about courage and always remaining hopeful about the future. It is easy to get down about things happening in the world, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It seems all the news stories get progressively worse, with bombing after bombing dominating the headlines. But what the news media doesn’t cover is the stories of remarkable everyday families, like the Rezas and how they choose to continue living their lives.

The Rezas show a different side of what is going on in Pakistan and the hard choices families have to make. While most people would wilt under the pressure and uncertainty, these families are able to tap into a reservoir of hope—they look to the future and know that things will get better. The ability to not lose this laser-like focus is exceptional. And I think with the right approach, we can incorporate that attitude into our lives as well.