

An Afghan Tragedy: The Pashtun practice of having sex with young boys

With the looming withdrawal of Nato troops and a persistent insurgent threat, Afghanistan is in a precarious position. Innumerable tragedies have beleaguered rural Afghans throughout the past decades of conflict — perpetual violence, oppression of women, and crushing poverty have all contributed to the Hobbesian nature of life in the Afghan countryside.

While the Afghan government has been able to address some of these issues since the Taliban's ouster in 2001, archaic social traditions and deep-seated gender norms have kept much of rural Afghanistan in a medieval state of purgatory. Perhaps the most deplorable tragedy, one that has actually grown more rampant since 2001, is the practice of bacha bazi — sexual companionship between powerful men and their adolescent boy conscripts.

This phenomenon presents a system of gender reversal in Afghanistan. Whereas rural Pashtun culture remains largely misogynistic and male-dominated due to deeply-ingrained Islamic values, teenage boys have become the objects of lustful attraction and romance for some of the most powerful men in the Afghan countryside.

Demeaning and damaging, the widespread subculture of paedophilia in Afghanistan constitutes one of the most egregious ongoing violations of human rights in the world. The adolescent boys who are groomed for sexual relationships with older men are bought — or, in some instances, kidnapped — from their families and thrust into a world which strips them of their masculine identity. These boys are often made to dress as females, wear makeup, and dance for parties of men. They are expected to engage in sexual acts with much older suitors, often remaining a man's or group's sexual underling for a protracted period.

Evolution of Bacha Bazi

Occurring frequently across southern and eastern Afghanistan's rural Pashtun belt and with ethnic Tajiks in the northern Afghan countryside, bacha bazi has become a shockingly common practice. Afghanistan's mujahideen warlords, who fought off the Soviet invasion and instigated a civil war in the 1980s, regularly engaged in acts of

paedophilia. Keeping one or more “chai boys,” as these male conscripts are called, for personal servitude and sexual pleasure became a symbol of power and social status.

The Taliban had a deep aversion towards bacha bazi, outlawing the practice when they instituted strict nationwide sharia law. According to some accounts, including the hallmark *Times* article “Kandahar Comes out of the Closet” in 2002, one of the original provocations for the Taliban's rise to power in the early 1990s was their outrage over paedophilia. Once they came to power, bacha bazi became taboo, and the men who still engaged in the practice did so in secret.

When the former mujahideen commanders ascended to power in 2001 after the Taliban's ouster, they brought with them a rekindled culture of bacha bazi. Today, many of these empowered warlords serve in important positions, as governors, line ministers, police chiefs and military commanders.

Since its post-2001 revival, bacha bazi has evolved, and its practice varies across Afghanistan. According to military experts I talked to in Afghanistan, the lawlessness that followed the deposing of the Taliban's in rural Pashtunistan and northern Afghanistan gave rise to violent expressions of paedophilia. Boys were raped, kidnapped and trafficked as sexual predators regained their positions of regional power. As rule of law mechanisms and general order returned to the Afghan countryside, bacha bazi became a normalized, structured practice in many areas.

Many “chai boys” are now semi-formal apprentices to their powerful male companions. Military officials have observed that Afghan families with an abundance of children are often keen to provide a son to a warlord or government official — with full knowledge of the sexual ramifications — in order to gain familial prestige and monetary compensation. Whereas bacha bazi is now largely consensual and non-violent, its evolution into an institutionalized practice within rural Pashtun and Tajik society is deeply disturbing.

Pedophilia and Islam

The fact that bacha bazi, which has normalized sodomy and child abuse in rural Afghan society, developed within a deeply fundamentalist Islamic region of the world is mystifying. According to a 2009 Human Terrain Team study titled “Pashtun Sexuality,” Pashtun social norms dictate that bacha bazi is not un-Islamic or homosexual at all — if the man does not love the boy, the sexual act is not reprehensible, and is far more ethical

than defiling a woman.

Sheltered by their pastoral setting and unable to speak Arabic — the language of all Islamic texts — many Afghans allow social customs to trump religious values, including those Quranic verses eschewing homosexuality and promiscuity. Warlords who have exploited Islam for political or personal means have also promulgated tolerance for bacha bazi. The mujahideen commanders are a perfect example of this — they fought communism in the name of jihad and mobilized thousands of men by promoting Islam, while sexually abusing boys and remaining relatively secular themselves.

Tragic Consequences

The rampant paedophilia has a number of far-reaching detrimental consequences on Afghanistan's development into a functional nation. The first — and most obvious — consequence of bacha bazi is the irreparable abuse inflicted on its thousands of victims.

Because it is so common, a significant percentage of the country's male population bears the deep psychological scars of sexual abuse from childhood. Some estimates say that as many as 50 percent of the men in the Pashtun tribal areas of southern Afghanistan take boy lovers, making it clear that paedophilia is a pervasive issue affecting entire rural communities. Many of the prominent Pashtun men who currently engage in bacha bazi were likely abused as children; in turn, many of today's adolescent victims will likely become powerful warlords or government-affiliated leaders with boy lovers of their own, perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

A second corrupting, and perhaps surprising, consequence of bacha bazi is its negative impact on women's rights in Afghanistan. It has become a commonly accepted notion among Afghanistan's latent homosexual male population that “women are for children, and boys are for pleasure.” Passed down through many generations and spurred by the vicious cycle created by the pedophile-victim relationship, many Afghan men have lost their attraction towards the opposite gender. Although social and religious customs still heavily dictate that all men must marry one or more women and have children, these marriages are often devoid of love and affection, and are treated as practical, mandated arrangements.

While the Afghan environment has grown more conducive to improving women's social statuses, the continued normalization of bacha bazi will perpetuate the traditional view of

women as second-class citizens — household fixtures meant for child-rearing and menial labor, and undeserving of male attraction and affection.

The third unfortunate consequence of bacha bazi is its detrimental bearing on the perpetual state of conflict in Afghanistan, especially in the southern Pashtun-dominated countryside. Because paedophilia and sodomy were, and remain, a main point of contention between the Islamist Taliban and traditional Pashtun warlords, the widespread nature of bacha bazi likely continues to fuel the Taliban's desire to reassert sharia law. The adolescent victims are vulnerable to Taliban intimidation and may be used to infiltrate the Afghan government and security forces.

The resurgence of bacha bazi since the Taliban's defeat and the significant percentage of government, police, and military officials engaged in the practice has put the United States and its NATO allies in a precarious position. By empowering these sexual predators, the coalition built a government around a "lesser evil," promoting often-corrupt pedophiles in lieu of the extremist, al-Qaida-linked Taliban. Going forward, the strong Western moral aversion to paedophilia will likely erode the willingness of NATO and international philanthropic agencies to continue their support for Afghanistan's development in the post-transition period. As Joel Brinkley, a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, asked: "So, why are American and NATO forces fighting and dying to defend tens of thousands of proud pedophiles, certainly more per capita than any other place on Earth?"

Looking Forward

Despite the grave nature of the child abuse committed across Afghanistan, this tragic phenomenon has received relatively little global attention. It has been highlighted mainly in sporadic news articles and one Afghan-produced documentary, while other Afghan issues such as women's rights and poverty are center stage.

From a human rights perspective, the pervasive culture of paedophilia deserves substantial international consideration due to its detrimental effects — the immediate and noticeable effects on the young victims, as well as the roadblocks it creates towards achieving gender equality and peace.

The only way to tackle both bacha bazi and gender inequality is to modernize Afghanistan's rule of law system. Afghan officials have been scrutinized in multiple reports

by the United Nations' Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict for their failure to protect children's rights. Although Afghan officials formally agreed to outlaw these practices in response to UN criticism in 2011, the government's ability and willingness to internally enforce laws protecting children has been non-existent.

If a future Afghan government can achieve a balance between the Taliban, who strictly enforced anti-paedophilia laws but harshly oppressed women, and the current administration, which has put an end to the hard-line Islamic subjugation of women but has allowed bacha bazi to reach shocking levels, Afghanistan's dismal human rights record may improve.

An additional strategy for combating bacha bazi is to attack the issue from an ethno-cultural standpoint. Identifying key tribal elders and other local powerbrokers who share the West's revulsion towards such widespread paedophilia is the first step in achieving lasting progress. As is true with women's rights, understanding Afghanistan's complex social terrain and bridging its cultural differences is necessary to safeguard the rights of adolescent boys.

The Afghan government's acknowledgement of bacha bazi and subsequent outreach into rural Pashtun communities, where the legitimacy of the government is often eclipsed by the power of warlords and tribal elders, will also be critical. The most important breakthrough, of course, will come when the Afghan government, police, and military rid themselves of all pedophiles. If the central government can ensure its representatives at the local level will cease their engagement in bacha bazi, the social norms are bound to change as well.

Eliminating this truly damaging practice will finally occur when a paedophile-free Afghan government is able to more closely connect the country's urban centers to its rural countryside. Only then will a progressive social code be established. And if this evolved social code can incorporate the tenets of Islam with social justice and effectively marginalize the archaic and abusive aspects of Pashtun and Tajik warlord culture, there is hope for Afghanistan yet.

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