

Nawruz Celebration in Mazar-i-Sharif

Authored by:
Saber Salem, Doctoral Candidate,
Jindal School of International Affairs



Jandeh Balal in Mazar

Every year Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of Balkh province located in Northern Afghanistan, hosts the centennial grand festival of *Nawruz*. Preparations for the iconic celebration are in full swing now and security is extremely tight given the participation of high-ranking government officials, foreign dignitaries and over a million people from all over the country and outside who come to this historic city to see firsthand the glamorous celebration and the joyous activities that accompany it. *Nawruz* is also celebrated in neighboring Tajikistan and Iran. The reason why *Nawruz* has been celebrated century after century in Mazar-i-Sharif is because of the Shrine of Hazrat Ali the fourth caliph of Islam and son-in-law and cousin of Prophet Mohammad.

Nawruz literally means new day and marks the beginning of the New Year in Afghanistan, which falls on the 21st of March. *Nawruz* is celebrated for forty days in Mazar where Wednesday's are assigned for women to visit the shrine of Hazrat Ali also popularly referred to as the 'Blue Mosque' by the foreigners. People begin preparations for *Nawruz* a month before. Trees around the Blue Mosque are festooned with colored bulbs, which illuminate the city in different colors at night.

People in Mazar also call it *Maila Guli Surkh*, which could be literally translated as the festival of red tulips. Just days before *Nawruz*, wild red tulips start blossoming on the low-lying hills of the Shadyan mountain range overlooking the city of Mazar. On the first day of *Nawruz* is *Jandah Bala* where a huge flag is hoisted in the compound of the Blue Mosque with thousands of people participating in the hoisting ceremony and soon after its raising, go to pray for a good and prosperous year ahead. *Jandah*

Bala is presided over either by the President or Vice President and the Provincial Governor due to its religious and cultural significance.



Red tulips on the green plains on the outskirts of Mazar

The second day of *Nawruz* is called *Jashni Dehqan* or the festival of farmers. In this day the farmers holding shovels on their shoulders pass by the stage where the Governor observes and greets them. This official gesture is to encourage farmers for better agricultural production. In his initial years in office as President, Hamid Karzai participated in the festival of farmers and encouraged them to enhance their agricultural production and be a part of the 'environmental green movement'.

Furthermore, *Nawruz* also comes with lots of activities in and around Mazar. The most prominent and euphoric activity is the traditional sport of *Buz Kashi*, literally translated means 'goat pulling'. Hundreds of horse riders gather in the *Buz Kashi* field and compete over the carcass of a one-year-old calf to lift it off the ground and dump it in an assigned circle. The game brought in by the invading Mongols, has been played for centuries throughout Afghanistan now.

When daytime activities finish, the night is brought alive with music and dance parties. Every year, famous singers from all over the country and abroad come to Mazar to celebrate *Nawruz* with musical concerts. Famous music bands are invited from neighboring countries to sing and showcase their music and culture alongside Afghan musicians.

The role of women is quite significant and noticeable during this festival. Women play a lead role in preparing *Samanak* and *Haft Miwa*. *Samanak* is a traditional dish that is prepared from germinated wheat. Women of the family get together to cook this month-old germinated wheat. While *Samanak* is on the fire cooking, women pick their drums and sing the famous song of *Samanak* and dance. Men are not allowed to participate in this exclusively women's gathering.

Haft Miwa literally means seven fruits. A week or so before *Nawruz*, seven types of dried fruits such as raisins, walnuts, almonds, pistachio, apricot, mulberries and some others are soaked in water. On the first day of *Nawruz* and after *Janda Bala*, women distribute it in small portions to all family members and to neighbors. Soon after *Haft Miwa* is served, they go to visit neighbors and relatives and together go to the green plains to see the red tulips and walk on the grass bare foot. They wait for Wednesday,

which is commonly known as women's day, to go to the Blue Mosque and celebrate *Nawruz* in a more joyous manner there.

The other special cuisine that is famous and prepared on the eve of *Nawruz* is *Sabzi Chalaw*—rice and spinach. The two are cooked separately. This dish comes with many other side dishes depending on the economic status of the family. Well off families add more number of side dishes filling up the table with a lavish spread of food and once the food is served they pray for the continuity of such happy gatherings throughout the year.

Nawruz is a festival of happiness, joy, forgiveness and change. It brings change in the weather pattern and in the nature. The harsh, cold winters give way to spring which marks the resuscitation of the cycle of nature. Fruit trees start blossoming in various colors and emit their distinct scents. People forget about the sad things that happened in the previous year and start the New Year with new hopes, aspirations and great enthusiasm.