



OPINION

I may never hear my cousin's voice again. Will you speak for him and my family in Afghanistan?

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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I was two years old when my family and I fled Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion and immigrated to Canada. We have never returned to visit the country since, and probably never will. The majority of my extended family did the same, taking refuge in Iran or Pakistan. But others – those who were not willing to leave their motherland – stayed and hoped for a promising future.

I have two cousins currently living in Afghanistan: a 24-year-old woman living in Herat, and a 27-year-old man living in Kabul. Both have young children; both witnessed the horrors of Taliban rule when they were young. And both have had to witness the collapse of any hope for that promising future over the last month, as the U.S. has withdrawn its military presence, the Afghan government has crumbled, and the Taliban has retaken the capital.

On the morning of Aug. 15, after a few messages exchanged over Facebook, my male cousin – a banker, an artist and a loving father – finally called me. He was desperately looking for a place to hide his books, paintings and his son's toys.

“You need to burn them,” I told him. “Get rid of them.”

“I cannot obey them. They will kill me and turn my wife into a ghanimat,” he said – using the Arabic word for “spoils of war,” which has become co-opted to refer to widowed women who are forced to marry Taliban soldiers.

I pleaded with him, begging him to follow their commands. “It’s the only way you and your family will survive,” I said.

With tattoos on his arms and an artist page showcasing his talents on Facebook, my cousin represented what the future of Afghanistan could have been. Now, he was crying over WhatsApp. “Never in my life did I believe this would happen,” he said.

I was on the phone with him and could hear the sound of gunshots outside. He had just lost his job at the bank and had managed to safely sneak out of his office to get home. “Now, I will have to beg on the streets to feed my family,” he said, adding, “I’m worried about my son.” Like many young boys in Afghanistan, his son could be forced to join the Taliban.

Schools and businesses were already closed. My cousin’s television was taken and he was already given a time to go to the mosque. The Taliban has declared that men are obligated to attend mosque three times a day.

He was worried that he’d be late to the mosque because he was searching for bandages to cover his haram – forbidden – tattoos. “Otherwise, they’ll cut my arms off,” he said.

The Taliban were going door-to-door, making sure no one had anything haram in their homes, such as toys, sculptures, paintings and books.

“Our president left us. Women are already told not to leave their homes or attend school. Burka is now mandatory,” my cousin said.

Finally, I willed the gumption to ask a difficult question: “Why didn’t you leave Afghanistan when you had the chance?”

“This all happened so fast ... in less than a week. We are stuck. We are slaves,” he replied.

I was given permission to post his private messages on social media. I’ve blacked out his name and profile picture to protect his identity. I also asked him to send me videos. “People here need to see what’s going on. Otherwise, they won’t care,” I said.

Although he’d be putting his life at risk, he agreed to send some videos. “That’s only if I have internet – the Taliban will not allow it.”

Just before we ended our call, he told me: “Rahela, don’t forget our voices.”

That may have been the last time I will hear his. Several hours later, I messaged him again on Facebook – with no response.

I’m scared for him. I’m scared for my people. I’m scared for my country.

I’ve received an outpouring of sympathy online from friends on social media: “My heart breaks,” they say, or, “My prayers are with you.” But neither prayers nor heartbreak will do anything.

Listen to our stories. Spread awareness. Pressure those in power to act. That's what we, as a privileged society here in Canada, can do for the people of Afghanistan – to use our voices, so we can hold tight to theirs.

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