

## **Charlatans or Holy Men?**

**Author:** [Zabiullah Ahsass](#)

Police and religious leaders struggle to crack down on beggars who they believe con gullible worshippers.

At the famous Hazrat Ali shrine in Mazar-e-Sharif, a green-robed man is talking to a crowd of hundreds. With a turban whose end dangles nearly to the ground, and a long staff, he tells onlookers that he is directly descended from the Prophet Mohammad and is willing to pray for them - for a price.

"If I pray for you, you will succeed in both worlds [life and the hereafter]. I have a home and children. Will there be five generous people to each give me a 50 afghani note?" he asked.

Shopkeeper Mohammad Karim handed over the money, around one US dollar, saying, "They praise the Prophet's family and then they pray for us, so I gave him money. I do not know more than that; I'm illiterate."

Nearby, a throng of people take turns to grasp at hundreds of padlocks suspended from a metre-wide cooking dish. They believe that if one unlocks when they pull it, their wishes will come true. To boost their luck, they throw banknotes into the dish.

At this and other shrines around Afghanistan, many folk practices - some older than Islam itself - persist. Visitors tie pieces of cloth to trees, pound in nails, kiss the soil, light candles and pluck out bits of stone - all in the hope that their prayers will be answered.

Others give money to the men in colourful clothes who sit and stand at the shrines, telling stories or chanting, because they claim to have better access to God.

These practices are frowned on by orthodox Islam even though they are commonplace in Afghanistan. Local mullahs say that prayer is between the worshipper and God, and no special intercession is needed. They say the belief that a prayer has more power when made at a shrine is tantamount to worshipping the place itself, which Islam expressly forbids.

Qari Ziauddin, one of the mullahs at the Shahedo Shamsheera mosque in Kabul, told IWPR that the only legitimate thing for worshippers to do at such places was to pray for the dead and attend to their own souls.

But the religious authorities have chosen not to crack down too hard on these long-established customs. The hard-line Taleban regime outlawed them and cleared the shrines - but only because its religious police beat or jailed offenders.

Sayed Abdul Wahed, who is deputy head of police at the Mazar-e-Sharif shrine, told IWPR that in the two years since the fall of the Taleban, his officers had regularly thrown all the storytellers and beggars out, only to see them take up their places again the following day.

He said the mullahs should get rid of all the frauds because they misuse the shrine.

Mullah Fazalullah, head of a government department that regulates religious property, agrees that the folk practices violate Islamic law. "It is not a good thing, it is not correct," he said.

Fazalullah believes that the officials responsible for Islamic teaching should try to re-educate people who persist with popular practices. But getting rid of the people who make their living at the shrines won't be so easy. "Twenty-three years of fighting brought devastation to the country, so this is not the right time to take such action," the mullah told IWPR. In other, more developed Islamic countries, beggars are given food and put to work, but Afghanistan isn't capable of this yet, he said.

So for the moment, anyway, the beggars and storytellers are likely to continue their trade, to the dismay of those who believe they are little more than tricksters.

Najibullah, who has a money-changing shop in Mazar-e-Sharif, said, "They are just playing on the emotions of simple Afghans.

"They lie in the name of praising Allah and the prophet, just to get money. Most of these people are immoral and gamblers."

Zabiullah Ahsass is an independent journalist who recently completed IWPR training in Mazar-e-Sharif. IWPR staff reporters Hafizullah Gardesh, Farida Nekzad and Danish Karokhel in Kabul contributed to this report.

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