



■ By Mary Faizi

# Nawrouz at a glance

**The 21st day** of March is unquestionably a day of significance. It is the first day of spring and the vernal equinox: the only time in the year when night and daylight are equal, with exactly 12 hours of daylight and 12 hours of darkness. The 21st signifies the end of winter and a time of rebirth. To people throughout Afghanistan, central Asia and those of Afghan descent in the West, March 21st is Nowrouz literally meaning "new day" in Farsi, marking the start of a New Year or Sal-e-Now. The significance of Nowrouz should not be diminished by Afghans living in the West. It is an integrate part of Afghan history and culture.

Nowrouz is celebrated by Afghans during the month of Hamal, the first month of the Afghani calendar, which happens to fall on March 21st (or sometimes March 20th during leap years). Nowrouz is not only celebrated by Afghans, but by all the former Aryan tribes of the ancient times, including the Iranians, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks and Tajiks; people who all have a common ancestry and history, and are ethnically and linguistically related. The day not only marks the beginning of Bahar (spring), but

also the start of a new year or Sal- e-Now in these nations. Nowrouz is one of the oldest known new year celebrations in the world, perhaps the oldest. If left unbroken the chain of years would surpass the Islamic year, Western year and the Chinese year. However, due to disruptions, such as invading armies, new year will be 1384 in Afghanistan.

prominent religion in Central Asia that originated in Balkh, Afghanistan. The day is believed to be founded by the Zoroastrian prophet, Spenta Zarathustra, over 5,000 years ago in Balkh. Invaders from the Greeks to the Arabs, tried to put an end to Nowrouz but without success. The Taliban tried to ban it during their oppressive regime, but since their fall it is being celebrated once again in full force throughout Afghanistan.

There are many different ways in which people celebrate Nowrouz, depending on their country of origin and region within that country. Before celebrations even begin, a traditional Afghan home would undergo a "spring cleaning" where the entire house is thoroughly cleaned; a concept which has been adopted by the West. Traditionally, Afghans begin celebrations on the eve of March 21st and continue for

thirteen days. Afghans celebrate the day by wearing new clothes and making house visits, in which ideally the young go to visit the old and gifts are often exchanged. Haft-Maiwa (seven fruits) a mixture of seven dried fruits in sweet water awaits in each



The origins of Nowrouz go back to ancient times as the celebration predates modern boundaries and religions. Nowrouz did not originate in Iran, as it is claimed, but in the mountains of Northern Afghanistan. Its roots are in Zoroastrianism, the once

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household for arriving guests. The significance of the number seven goes back to ancient times and the Zoroastrian scriptures. These aspects of Nowrouz celebrations are common to all Afghans throughout the country.

In addition to Nowrouz, there are other festivities which take place in Afghanistan on March 21st. There is, for example, the traditional day of Rooz-e-Dehgan: a traditional farmers market where the best crops and animals are brought out for display on Nowrouz. This is followed by Jashn-e-Nehal Shani, in which trees are planted. In the past, every Afghan was required to plant at least one tree during the thirteen days so that the next Nowrouz would be as fruitful as the last. Another tradition is to boil and dye eggs in vibrant colours and then have an "egg fight." The rule simply is that whoever cracks the other person's egg gets to keep it. Again this is a tradition that has been adopted by the West in modern Easter celebrations of dying boiled eggs. The national sport of Buzkashi is also incorporated in Nowrouz celebrations as tournaments are held throughout the country, showcasing the most talented players. Although there are many common aspects of Nowrouz celebrations, the day is not homogeneous throughout Afghanistan.

There are festivities and events during Nowrouz that are particular to each region of Afghanistan. In the province of Herat, for example, there is the Park Behzad festival where only women are allowed to picnic for the thirteen days of Nowrouz. Additionally, in Balkh province visiting the tomb of Ali is customary. Since Afghanistan is an Islamic country, Nowrouz has also incorporated an Islamic aspect. For the faithful a pilgrimage is made to the city of Mazar-e-Sharif where it is believed by some that the fourth Caliph of Islam-Hazrat Ali- is buried. In Kandahar annual wrestling matches and sporting events are held during Nowrouz. Each region and each family has their own special customs or festivities during Sal e Now.

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■ By Farzana Bhatti

## Ali Ibrahimi, The Winner of 2004 YMCA International Peace Medallion Award

**"I would harass people as they walked by me for donations, and I would get their money, but educating them was most important."**

Ali Ibrahimi has big dreams and he's making them a reality. The fourth year McMaster student refers to his local activism by quoting Gandhi, "you have to be the change you want to see in the world." Ibrahimi, 22, is the winner of the 2004 YMCA International Peace Medallion Award (YIPMA). The award was presented to him last month for his efforts in raising money for war-torn Afghanistan and promoting peace.

Ibrahimi is proud, but humble. He is dressed casually in jeans and an ordinary white shirt, and his short, black hair is gelled up. As he speaks, he leans forward and waves his hands with strong gestures; he is passionate about his cause. Ibrahimi helped raise \$3,000 for an Afghan project by Medicines Sans Frontiers, because "they go to other countries to build, instead of destroy." The student recalls campaigning at his school: "I would harass people as they walked by me for donations, and I would get their money, but educating them was most important."

Ibrahimi was born in Kabul, Afghanistan but only lived there for seven years before he left. His family immigrated to Canada because of the Soviet-Afghan war.

He volunteers with the Afghan Canadian Youth Organization because he says Afghan teenagers need groups that are specific to their demographic; they need support because of recent US bombings. "After 9/11, I was walking on campus and a professor said that he would blow up Afghanistan. I was completely shocked to think that our population has been dehumanized." Frustrated, Ibrahimi decided to make a difference. He helped create a dramatic production about the accounts of racism and stereotype experienced by Afghan youth after 9/11. The student would

take a bus from Hamilton to Toronto for two hours each week to attend meetings, and he says sometimes, it's like having another full-time job. Ibrahimi is currently in a coop placement, doing lab work for the Toronto General Hospital.

The biology student has solid plans for the future; he will study dentistry. He also has many personal ambitions; he wants to pursue his love of singing. Ibrahimi says he looks up to the singer Bryan Adams. But his dreams centre around one noble cause: making a difference in the world. "Bryan Adams said that when you are in a position to influence people, you have a responsibility to make change. I want to combine my passion for activism with my talent." He has performed songs at some of the Afghan charity events that made him the YIPMA winner.

This is the first big award Ibrahimi has received, and he is still shocked. "By some bizarre selection process I ended up winning it. I don't think what I have won is worthy of the award; there are broad, huge problems in the world and I have only touched the tip of the iceberg."

He says that winning this award encouraged him to continue his activism on a larger scale. His next project is the Write-A-Million campaign with the ACYO, where he hopes to donate one million pens and notebooks for needy Afghan children.

According to him the biggest challenge for Afghanistan is creating a sense of unity. "Once unity is established, everything else can fall into place." He says that we need to create a democracy and tell our leaders how our country should be run. "I doubt we can fix these problems in our lifetime but winning the award has changed my view. I'm ready to let this become a part of me, not just something I do on the side. I want to do this for the rest of my life."