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In Pakistan, valentines are exchanged in secret

by Naila Inayat by USA Today by Religion News Service

Lahore, Pakistan — Outside the gates of the women-only Kinnaird College in this central Pakistani city, boys shyly approach, bearing roses and small tokens of affection.

The girls, clad in a spectrum of reds, happily accept, even as they peer around nervously to see who is watching.

"Feb. 14 is a very special day for me to celebrate love because it was on this day last year that I met my boyfriend," said Sania Ehsan, 21, holding a basket full of chocolates and heart-shaped cookies to exchange with her Valentine.

"I baked the cookies myself," she added proudly, becoming nervous after spotting her boyfriend approaching from across the road.

In a devout Muslim society where adultery is punishable by death and public displays of love are forbidden, the young are increasingly using Valentine's Day as a form of rebellion -- some call it a silent revolution of sorts.

Celebrating on this day is a direct challenge to the rigid Islamic groups that hold sway in the country and who deem such displays as immoral.

"Every year that Feb. 14 is celebrated, it is done so as the Day of Shame," said Abdul Muqet, president of Punjab University Jamiat-e-Talaba, the student wing of the conservative Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party. "All over Pakistan, our organization holds protests, marches and distributes literature telling our youth how they are being manipulated toward this un-Islamic and immoral tradition."

According to Muqet, Valentine's Day has no relevance or place in a Pakistani society; it is only

"vulgarity" and a challenge to the sacred system of family as conceived in Islam.

"We cannot allow such acts as they will spoil the present and future generations," he said.

Despite such sentiments, across Pakistan, roadside stalls sell buckets of red roses and teenagers hang red heart balloons from their scooters. Radio jockeys speak of "love in the air" and bakeries bake special delicacies including cupcakes intended "for your special love."

"Unofficially, it is celebrated at most universities," said Rehman Afridi, 23, of Peshawar, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "We as youngsters wait for this day, not only to show love but also to find out which new couples will be created on Valentine's Day."

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Even in the most conservative Pakistani province of Peshawar, where the morality police terrorize locals into strict obedience to conservative mores, the tradition is catching on among the young.

Here, Valentine's Day is celebrated like anywhere else in Pakistan -- in a hush-hush manner.

"While the mullahs go on with their conspiracy theories associated with Valentine's Day, nobody is actually listening to them," said Asam Khan, 23, a student in Peshawar.

"The restaurants and parks in Peshawar are full of couples -- I have seen so many couples skip their classes and go to a restaurant or park to celebrate the day," he added. "And then they come back to university just before classes are over so their families see that they are 'actually' coming back from the campus."

Some say this day is one that brings a fresh sense of freedom, empowerment and inspiration to Pakistan's young.

In Lahore, several young women sit patiently on the bench in the parking lot of their college, waiting for their valentines. An air of rebellion surrounds them.

"We are free to make our own choices in life -- whether that's personal or professional," said Amina Shaheed, 24, adamantly. "If I love someone, then my parents need to know that I have every right to be with him. They can't really stop me, can they?"

"Also, I think it is pretty old-fashioned to just think that girls who are in relationships have questionable characters and that they are not good for the society," she added. "One has to move with the world -- you can't just live in a bubble of your own making."

Some, meanwhile, use the day for lightheartedness.

One tradition is for men to don red, even though in some parts of the country, such as Peshawar, it is considered "unmanly."

"Our entire college campus is literally painted in red, with males wearing red even though it is considered girlish," Afridi said. "I guess there will always be a group of losers like me who somehow always manage to be single when it matters the most, and who make fun of the boys in red -- but it's all in good fun."

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