



washingtonpost.com

Afghans' Passion for Indian Soaps Faces Unhappy Ending After Ban

Advertisement

Bowling to Clerical Pressure, Ministry Deems Shows Un-Islamic

By Pamela Constable
Washington Post Foreign Service
Saturday, May 24, 2008; A18

KABUL -- Five nights a week, millions of Afghans put aside their dinner dishes, shush their children and turn on the TV to gape at Indian soap operas acted out in impossibly lavish settings by stars in sequined gowns and wedding jewelry.

To their defenders among Afghan journalists and social analysts, the dramas are a harmless distraction from the hardships and tensions of life in a poor, war-torn country where dust invades every crevice and suicide bombings are common.

To their critics in the government and among Muslim clergy, the shows represent an invasion of foreign behavior and beliefs -- from glimpses of cleavage and Hindu shrines to story lines touching on such taboo topics as divorce, infidelity and illegitimacy.

This spring, the off-screen plot has taken a contentious turn. The Ministry of Information and Culture banned the evening dramas last month, and government prosecutors have now charged one resisting TV station with offending public morals and endangering national security.

"These are serious charges that carry prison terms," said Saad Mohseni, co-owner of Tolo TV, which still airs the two most popular Indian soaps. "They are trying to go after us from every possible direction. The things they object to in the serials are happening every day in our own society, but we bury our heads in the sand."

The government of President [Hamid Karzai](#), although propped up by Western aid and defended against Islamist insurgents by Western troops, is also highly sensitive to religious emotions in this conservative Muslim society and reluctant to defy Muslim elders.

Members of the senior religious council had complained that the serials were offensive to Muslims and should be banned. They have expressed similar concerns about other TV shows, such as a version of "[American Idol](#)," saying they encourage immorality.

"Our people are not against modern development or entertainment, but they should not turn our children away from the path of Islam," said Enayatullah Balegh, a member of the council. "I can control my daughter to not have illegal relations with boys, but TV is like Satan -- it is something you cannot control."

The substance of Balegh's fears is plastered all over this chaotic capital of dusty bazaars and glittering new office facades. Posters of Indian pop stars adorn shop windows, and everyone seems to know the latest scandalous revelation on "Tulsi," the nickname of the most popular Indian show.

Yet many Afghans who admit to enjoying the shows also say they disapprove of them. In conversations on campuses and in Internet cafes, young people's comments reflected the contradictions of a society undergoing a confused transition from strict, insular tradition to constant electronic exposure.

"These shows have a bad impact on our traditions," said Babrak Yusufzai, 19, a political science student wearing jeans and a Yankees baseball cap. "Children are learning about Indian ceremonies instead of Muslim ones." Yusufzai said he liked the idol-search show called "Afghan Star" but added, "Why don't they have idols of learning or law, not just singing songs?"

Alim Jamali, 27, a psychology student, said the Indian serials are "just like opium -- they make everyone addicted and distract them from the work of rebuilding our country." All Afghans want education and rights, he added, "but they must be within the frame of Islam."

The cult of celebrity is also a booming business, whose proprietors say they are only offering what their customers crave and what their country's new freedom allows. At a busy shop in Kabul's Titanic Market, the walls are covered with mini-posters of Indian TV and film stars in sensual poses.

"The older people don't like them, but the younger people love them," said the owner, Jamshid. "In the [Taliban](#) time, we only sold posters of Koranic verses, but we have democracy now, and people can buy whatever they want."

The conflict over TV entertainment is just one front in a broader battle over the role of television here. The medium, which was state-controlled until the 1990s and banned under extremist Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, is already the major source of information in a country where most adults are illiterate.

To violent fundamentalist groups such as the Taliban, television is both a religious offense and a political threat. Last month, armed men wearing masks entered a mosque in Logar province and warned people not to watch it, and masked attackers used razors to slash a female TV newscaster in Herat.

But conservative political factions headed by former Islamic militia leaders are trying to compete with private channels such as Tolo by establishing their own. With elections due next year, media observers say, TV is likely to become a vicious battleground, with propaganda masquerading as news and free speech.

"These former warlords are putting out their viruses on the airwaves now. They are anti-democratic, but they want to use the media for their own purposes," said Shukria Barakzai, a journalist and lawmaker from Kabul. "We need to build an independent, professional media, but I'm afraid it will die before it has a chance to flower."

The same contradictions are apparent in parliament, where liberals like Barakzai have far less influence than conservative Muslim politicians. This spring, the latter group introduced legislation that was almost identical to the old Taliban laws banning women's cosmetics, mixed-sex dancing at weddings, and animal fighting.

The proposal, unlikely to become law but indicative of the conservatives' growing clout, also included a broader ban on TV shows deemed un-Islamic and punishment for anyone who imports, distributes or buys "semi-naked" images in any form.

To Afghanistan's Western backers, the emergence of free media was a hallmark of the Karzai government, installed after the U.S.-led ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001, and the reemergence of rigid Islamic policies puzzles and disturbs them.

This month, Tolo's Mohseni visited Washington and made the rounds of think tanks and government offices, warning that Afghan press freedom is under heavy assault. Privately, U.S. officials and scholars have urged Karzai to put more force behind his rhetorical championing of press freedom.

But the president's hopes for reelection have made it difficult for him to defy the Muslim clerics, and his tactic of apportioning senior posts as a form of political peace-keeping has further weakened his hand. The current information minister, for example, is a conservative who was once allied with a militia boss.

In one form or another, Afghan observers here say, the media and culture wars are likely to continue until the older generation of leaders -- veterans of male-dominated, tribal politics and the fight against Soviet communism -- are replaced by a younger generation that is better educated and includes women in leadership positions.

"Change has to come, because 62 percent of Afghans are under 30," said Abdul Hamid Mobarez, head of the national journalists' union. "People need entertainment. There is no security, and no place to breathe," he said. "Our government is weak, but we need to resist the forces of Talibanization and defend our new democracy."

But some analysts here say it would be a mistake to assume that the popularity of foreign shows means the rules of Afghan society -- such as arranged marriages and absolute obedience to elders -- are likely to change. And many young people say that what they like about the Indian soaps is not their exotic, risqué aspects but their familiar, mundane ones, such as family feuds that feature dominating mothers-in-law, scheming relatives and timid brides.

"I like the serials because the issues are just the same as ours," said Khatia, 19, a literature student at Kabul University, who wore the modest black tunic and colorful head scarf that is the unofficial uniform of female students in the capital. "We do not want foreign culture to take over Afghanistan. We want to become a developed and modern Muslim country."

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.