

Query response a-7696-2 (7697) of 27 July 2011

Afghanistan: Information on the treatment of artists, actors, theatre workers (including script writers), singers etc. by the Taliban

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A female Afghan film director quoted by Reuters in June 2011 describes the difficulty in finding actresses for films due to prevailing ultra-conservative Muslim attitudes. Many view acting as un-Islamic and inappropriate for women. Another film director states that family pressure stopped several of her actresses from showing up on set in 2009 when she was filming a real-life story about an honour killing. The article says that the Afghan film industry has received threats from the resurgent Taliban:

"The first Afghan female in her profession, Sahar, 36, has become a household name after acting and directing for more than half her life. She is adored by Afghan women. Like other Afghan directors, Sahar says finding actresses is her top challenge in an ultra-conservative Muslim country where many view acting as un-Islamic and inappropriate for women. 'Some Afghans think cinema is a bad place for girls,' said 19-year-old Deba Barezai, who plays the young bride in Sahar's 15-part TV series. 'Working in cinema has caused me lots of problems and difficulties.' [...]

Afghan-Canadian director Nelofer Pariza said family pressure stopped several of her actresses from showing up on set when filming 2009's 'An Act of Dishonour', a real-life story about an honour killing. 'It was really sad. Fear would actually stop them from coming to work,' [...]

Pariza and Sahar are part of a handful of female Afghan directors who focus on violence against women in a bid to both employ women on screen and expose their plight. [...] Further complicating their challenges are the threats the film industry receives from a resurgent Taliban, who banned television and women from most work before their austere

rule was toppled by U.S.-backed Afghan forces a decade ago. [...] The Afghan film industry says suicide attacks and bombs threaten the livelihood of its cinema just as much as its lack of quality equipment. 'These are the reasons our cinema today cannot improve,' said Latif Ahmadi, a much-loved director and head of Afghan Film, the state-run cinema agency." (Reuters, 14 June 2011)

The New York Times (NYT) reports in September 2010 that militants cut off both feet of an actress who was to play the leading role in a film that is overtly critical of the Taliban. Sonia Nassery Cole, the Afghan-American director of this film, survived a bomb blast, machine gun fire and received telephone threats:

"Sonia Nassery Cole knew that shooting a movie on location in Afghanistan could get her killed. The most vivid reminder came a few weeks before filming, she said, when militants located her leading actress and cut off both of her feet. [...] Unable to find another actress to take the part – the film is overtly critical of the Taliban – Ms. Cole, 45, decided to play the role herself. [...]

Afghanistan at one point had a bustling film industry, but the Taliban banned motion pictures and closed or destroyed theaters. Activity has returned [...]. Days on location sometimes began at 4 a.m. because security was easier to provide with fewer pedestrians around, she said. Before the film wrapped production last fall in Kabul, Ms. Cole survived a bomb blast that shattered the windows of her hotel, machine gun fire and grim telephone threats warning her to go home. Three senior crew members – her cinematographer, a producer and a set designer – did just that, abandoning the movie in the middle of production, according to Ms. Cole." (NYT, 21 September 2010)

Reuters reports in June 2009 that, according to the head of Merke Khel village (Nangarhar province), Taliban fighters have beaten up musicians who had performed at a wedding, shaved their heads and left them tied to trees overnight. They made them take oaths in the presence of villagers that they would not sing or play music at weddings again:

"Taliban fighters beat musicians, shaved their heads and left them tied to trees overnight because they performed at an Afghan wedding, a village tribal chief said on Monday, a sign of the fighters' growing influence. [...] While in power from 1996-2001, the Taliban banned music as un-Islamic. [...] 'A party was going on when a group of Taliban grabbed five musicians and started beating them and smashing their musical instruments,' said Rahmatullah Khan, a head of Merke Khel village in the east of the country. 'The musicians were tied up with rope to trees last night and villagers found them in the morning when going out for prayers,' Khan said. Khan said Taliban fighters shaved the heads of the musicians and made them take oaths in the presence of villagers that they would not sing or play music at weddings again." (Reuters, 15 June 2009)

In February 2010, BBC Monitoring reports that the Taliban now encourage poets and singers, while they continue to reject music accompanied by instruments as un-Islamic. The article mentions that occasionally reports appear in the Afghan media of Taliban punishing musicians, attacking wedding ceremonies where musicians are performing, confiscating musical instruments and destroying music videos and tapes:

„While the Taleban now encourage poets and singers, they continue to shun music accompanied by instruments as un-Islamic, a distraction and waste of time. Every now and then reports appear in the Afghan media of Taleban punishing musicians, attacking wedding ceremonies where musicians are entertaining the guests, confiscating musical instruments and destroying music videos and tapes. As one of their first acts after coming to power in the 1990s, the Taleban closed down the state-run Afghan TV, banned music from airwaves and closed down cinemas. However, there have been reports that some Taleban in some areas are more tolerant of people listening to music, but no general change of policy in this regard has been observed.“ (BBC Monitoring, 23 February 2010)

AFP reports in December 2008 that Taliban abducted six musicians and an election worker in Paktika province. One of the musicians was found dead the following day. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the abduction, saying the hostages had disregarded a ban on music, but denied killing the victim (AFP, 14 December 2008).

In a January 2011 article, the Los Angeles Times newspaper describes the story of an Afghan musician who, after two decades in exile, returned to Kabul where he is helping to train young musicians:

„Master tabla player Asif Mahmood had fled to Britain, to escape violence and fanatics who opposed music. Now he's back in Kabul's music quarter, helping train a new generation of musicians. [...] The 63-year-old Mahmood keeps alive an ancient flame, an authentic Afghan culture that has managed to survive decades of war, grinding poverty and religious extremists who used to threaten to lynch musicians with their instruments. Now the threats to the country's fragile traditional arts come from a flood of high-tech pop from Tajikistan or the Persian Gulf as well as rising fear that the capital will become engulfed in violence once again. [...]

It was once among the most storied places in Central Asia. More than a century and a half ago, the Afghan monarch Emir Sher Ali Khan established Kharabat Street as Kabul's music quarter, where those who entertained at the castle on the mountain ridge would live. On horseback they made their way up the slope to the castle, and then back down, night after night. Artists, musicians, composers and instrument makers flocked here, living in mud-brick houses with courtyards. [...] After the Soviets left, the Moscow-backed government of President Najibullah was also kind to musicians, bestowing gifts of flutes to the people of Kharabat. But dark days were coming. Kharabat had long been viewed suspiciously by pious Afghans who forbade their children to study music and even beat Kharabatis, saying they were depraved enemies of God. There's no such thing as ‚Afghan music,‘ they argued and still argue, or anything outside Islam in Afghan culture. Najibullah's fall unleashed the fury of the Islamists. Once the mujahedin dislodged him, ‚we lost everything,‘ Mahmood says. [...]

Mahmood fled to India, where he stayed for two years before heading to Britain, where he lived for 18 years. [...] When he finally returned to Kharabat in 2003, it lay in ruins. Homes had been looted, squatters lived in makeshift encampments and wild dogs roamed the alleys. But Mahmood was happy to be home again even if it meant leaving his six

children, one of them a tabla player and another a singer, in London. [...] Sifting through the archives at the national radio station, he noted with delight that the same Taliban members who publicly threatened to string musicians up with their instruments had painstakingly maintained audiotapes of the master musicians. 'Otherwise, they would have erased every music file at the radio building,' he says. Mahmoud began drawing students, now numbering about 25, who helped him build the three-story house that serves as his home and a music academy for the aspiring musicians. [...] From time to time, even hard-line Islamists show up at the nearby Sufi Muslim lodge to listen to his music, and he feels compelled to engage them in debate. After all, he says, getting them to appreciate his music is a way to ensure Kharabat Street's survival. 'We discuss everything about Islam, arts,' he says. 'They listen to our Sufi music. Maybe it will soften them.'" (Los Angeles Times, 30 January 2011)

In a March 2009 report, Agence France-Presse (AFP) provides the following account of a young female singer from Kandahar who won the "Afghan Star" competition. Because of this, she was considered a disgrace in Kandahar and started to receive death threats, amongst others from male relatives and neighbours, which forced her to leave the country:

"Lema Sahar never ventured out in public without an all-enveloping burqa - not until she jumped on stage and sang her heart out in the Afghan version of 'American Idol'. In a series of performances beamed across the country, the girl from Kandahar showed her face to the world - although her hair was covered by an Islamic veil - as she crooned anguished Afghan love songs. She charmed her way into the third spot of the 2008 version of the wildly popular 'Afghan Star' competition, beating more than 2,000 rivals in votes sent by mobile telephone text message. [...] She had become a star. But not in her hometown of Kandahar, a southern stronghold of the Taliban where women are seldom seen in public and never without a burqa which includes a small grille to cover the eyes. In Kandahar Lema was considered a disgrace and she soon began receiving death threats, even from her own male relatives. She had no choice but to flee for her life. Speaking from the Pakistani city of Peshawar, where she has been in hiding since fleeing Afghanistan two months ago, she told AFP: 'My life is under threat, everybody is threatening to kill me. It's all because I participated in the 'Afghan Star'.' In a telephone call arranged by a close relative in Afghanistan, she said: 'My own relatives, some of my cousins, our neighbours, were also threatening to kill me.' Other threats were anonymous, sometimes in letters dropped at the family home. 'They were saying that they will kill me because I brought shame to them. I was moving from one place to another when I was in Kandahar. I was scared,' Lema said, speaking in her native Pashtu." (AFP, 23 March 2009)

A BBC report published in August 2009 gives the following account of the activities of a music/television producer and a chess player, both of whom live in Kandahar:

"Nearly everyone who lives in Kandahar city, the capital of Afghanistan's southern province by the same name, has acquaintances among the local Taliban militants. [...] Mr Anis has been hosting music shows for two Kandahar-based television stations for some time, and is now setting up the city's first audio-visual studios where television plays would be produced. Taliban consider music and television viewing as un-Islamic, and have often

spoken to him by telephone about his plans, without overtly threatening him. 'Their message is clear, though, that I should give up my plans, but producing television dramas has been my dream since I was living in the Pakistani city of Quetta as a refugee,' he says. [...]

Kandahar, once a major centre of arts and culture in Afghanistan, has many dreamers like Mr Anis. In the soothing, air-conditioned atmosphere of Kandahar Coffee Shop - a trendy café with a small library and a billiards parlour - a group of old and young people sit quietly around a table, watching two of them play a game of chess. One of the players is Naimatullah Zalmay, the head of Kandahar's chess players' association. He has been playing chess for 35 years, he says, and is among the 14-member national chess team recently selected to play in international competitions. But like music and TV, chess is also considered un-Islamic by the Taliban and the country's powerful conservative clerics. When I ask him if he feels threatened by the Taliban, he gives me a wry smile. 'The Taliban's position on the issue is well known, but what do you do when a high official close to our democratic president opposes our request for funds on grounds that we are indulging in un-Islamic activities?' He doesn't name names, but one of his colleagues later tells me he was referring to Fazl Hadi Shinwari, chief justice of Afghanistan until August 2006 and still considered close to President Hamid Karzai." (BBC, 16 August 2009)

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