
Afghanistan: Private Kabul Station Offers Country's Answer To MTV

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Young Afghans are enthusiastically tuning in to pop music. Three years after the collapse of the Taliban regime -- which had banned any music it deemed as "un-Islamic" -- the popularity of pop music programs aired by Afghanistan's new private broadcasters is on the rise. Kabul's private Tolo TV has been broadcasting a nightly one-hour music video program for the past five months called "Hop." The format is similar to that of the international music television channel MTV -- with an Afghan twist. But conservative Islamists complain that programs like "Hop" are corrupting Afghan youth.

Prague, 15 February 2005 (RFE/RL) -- In addition to the songs of Western pop music stars like Madonna and Jennifer Lopez, "Hop's" young Afghan hosts also present music videos by Iranian, Turkish, and Indian pop stars.

After just five months on the air, the format is proving to be extremely popular with young Afghans. In fact, according to some audience research, "Hop" is becoming the most watched prime-time television program in Kabul. The one-hour show begins at 7:30 p.m. every night -- immediately following the news on the private station Tolo TV. The pace of the program is fast -- with tight editing and camera angles that are unconventional by the standards of Afghan state television. And the script focuses mainly on music and performers.

Twenty-two-year-old Shakeb Issar is one of the program's three video presenters. Issar had fled with his family to Pakistan in 1996 when the Taliban captured Kabul. He was just 13 at the time. Having returned to his homeland, Issar says he now wants to entertain viewers and motivate young Afghan performers.

"By playing these songs, we would like to motivate our singers and actors to become famous like Western artists such as Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez," he says.

The only female presenter on the show, 22-year-old Shaima Rezayee, stayed in Afghanistan during the five years that the Taliban controlled Kabul. She was forbidden from going to school as a teenager and, in the final years of Taliban rule, was forced to wear an all-encompassing burqa whenever she ventured outside.

Even now, with Afghan women free to study and to work, Rezayee says Afghans often are shocked by her appearance on television and on the streets of Kabul in Western-style clothing. But she makes no apologies.

"If the Afghans are ready or not, that is really up to the public to decide. It is not up to intellectuals and the academics and the so-called experts." -- Saad Mohseni, Tolo TV founder

"Whenever I go out, some people say some [bad] things," she says. "But there are more who praise it. Especially my family -- and a lot of young people in this country encourage me."

Sayad Suleiman, Tolo TV's news director, told RFE/RL that the station hopes to expand its broadcasts outside of Kabul in the future -- first, into other major cities and eventually to the point that people across all of Afghanistan can receive its programs.

Tolo TV was founded by Afghan entrepreneur Saad Mohseni and his family, who returned to Afghanistan in 2002 after living for 20 years in Australia.

The station's initial startup costs also were supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Like Kabul's private FM station Radio Arman -- which also was created by Mohseni's family with help from USAID -- broadcasts by Tolo TV include a mix of music, entertainment, news, and talks shows that focus on social issues.

Mohseni admits "Hop" has generated angry complaints from Afghans who think it promotes un-Islamic values. But Mohseni says the justification for the program is its popularity.

"If the Afghans are ready or not, that is really up to the public to decide," he says. "It is not up to intellectuals and the academics and the so-called experts. If the public uses these programs with enthusiasm and they are popular, then obviously the public seems to be ready for these types of programs."

One of the most outspoken critics of "Hop" is Fazl Hadi Shinwari, a conservative Islamist who serves as chief justice on the Afghan Supreme Court.

"It will corrupt our society, culture and most importantly, it will take our people away from Islam and destroy our country," he says. "This will make our people accept another culture, and make our country a laughingstock around the world."

Just over a year ago, Shinwari was on the losing side of an attempt to re-implement a ban against state television broadcasts that show female singers. The ban originated with Islamic fundamentalists who ruled Afghanistan during the early 1990s. It was lifted only after the collapse of the Taliban.

"Anything that is according to our Islamic Shariat is acceptable for us. But if it is not in Shari'a, people will have a hard time accepting it." -- Abdul Rahman Faizi, Kabul resident

A growing number of youth in Kabul appear to be rejecting Shinwari's arguments. Among them is Wahidullah, a young Afghan who counts himself among those who watch "Hop" almost every night.

"Whoever doesn't like this program is being a narrow-minded person," he says. "This program 'Hop' is so interesting for the young generation that a lot of young people are just as interested as I am and want to see even longer episodes."

Older Afghans often are skeptical. Sitting in a Kabul restaurant with a television tuned to "Hop," Kabul resident Abdul Rahman Faizi says the decisions of Islamic leaders continue to be important in Afghan society.

"Anything that is according to our Islamic Shariat is acceptable for us," Faizi says. "But if it is not in Shari'a, people will have a hard time accepting it."

For now, the broadcasts by each of the half-dozen private television stations across Afghanistan are limited to local audiences -- either in Kabul or other Afghan cities. The debate over pop music programs is expected to heat up in the months and years ahead as private stations expand their broadcasting range into provincial regions.