

Afghan Woman Voted Off 'Idol' Show

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"Afghan Star" contestant Lima Sahar, sings during a rehearsal at the Tolo TV office in Kabul, Afghanistan, Wednesday, March 12, 2008. In a first for post-Taliban Afghanistan, Sahar, a woman from the conservative Pashtun belt is one of the top three contenders in the country's version of "American Idol."

Conservative detractors decry the fact an Afghan woman has found success singing on television, while others, younger Afghans, say the show is helping women progress.

An Afghan woman who sang her way to the top three of Afghanistan's version of "American Idol" has been voted out.

Lima Sahar was the first Afghan woman to make it to the top three of the country's popular "Afghan Star" television show, which is now in its third year. Conservative critics had taken aim at the 20-year-old woman for singing in public in the conservative Muslim country.

Sahar, who comes from Afghanistan's most conservative tribe — the Pashtuns, thanked everyone who had voted for her. She also reminded the audience that there had been very little music in Afghanistan in the last two decades, which have been mostly consumed with war.

Under the Taliban regime that was overthrown in 2001, women were not even allowed out of their homes unaccompanied, while music and television were banned.

"I am very happy to have come in third place," Sahar said on the show broadcast Friday night. "This is an honor for me that the people voted for me. I really thank them and I also congratulate them."

The country's conservative cleric's council has protested to President Hamid Karzai over "Afghan Star" and Indian dramas shown on Tolo TV, the country's most popular station. But younger Afghans say the show is helping women progress.

"Afghan Star" will pick its winner between the two remaining contestants next Friday.

The top three finishers this season each represented one of Afghanistan's major ethnic groups. The two finalists are Hameed Sakhizada, a 21-year-old Hazara with a mop of black hair, and Rafi Naabzada, a 19-year-old ethnic Tajik who often wears a white leather jacket.

The show follows the same format as "American Idol," although the two are not connected. It has become one of Afghanistan's most popular TV shows, gathering large crowds around TVs in restaurants and homes. About 2,000 hopefuls auditioned for the third season of the show.

The singers perform in front of a studio audience and three judges, and past winners have been given recording deals. A woman finished fifth in the show's first season, but no female has risen as high as Sahar.

The winner this year will take home around \$5,000 — a king's ransom in Afghanistan.

Daud Sadiqi, the show's host, said "Afghan Star" has been a runaway hit that shows the world the "peaceful face of Afghanistan."