

Pop culture tests Afghan conservatism - USATODAY.com

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By Paul Wiseman, USA TODAY

KABUL, Afghanistan — The ups and downs of Afghan Star — Afghanistan's version of American Idol — can tell you a lot about how this country is changing.

In this year's version of the smash TV hit, one of the three finalists was from the troubled province of Kandahar. This was a big step for a conservative area that gave rise to the Taliban, the fundamentalist Islamic regime that prohibited all Western influence until it was toppled by the U.S. invasion in 2001.

Even more remarkable: The finalist from Kandahar, 20-year-old Lima Sahar, was female.

The host of Afghan Star says the conservative strains in Afghan society remain strong. When Dauod Sediqi travels to Kandahar to oversee tryouts for the shows, he takes a plane instead of driving because he fears he might be targeted by Islamic militants.

"In the major cities of Afghanistan, people love me," says Sediqi, 27, who wears Dolce & Gabbana shirts and lathers his hair with mousse. "But there are some places in Afghanistan where it is not safe for me to go."

Such contradictions abound in the rapidly expanding, ever-changing world of the Afghan media. Dozens of new TV stations, newspapers and magazines are proliferating and testing the limits of what is acceptable, while Taliban sympathizers and others lash out at what they see as heretical foreign influence.

Dozens of armed, masked Taliban insurgents barged into mosques in Logar province south of Kabul last month, threatening anyone who watched "un-Islamic" television programs, Information Ministry official Najib Manelai told Reuters.

The female owner of a radio station was killed by gunmen last year, and the female host of an MTV-style music show was gunned down in 2005.

Not all of the resistance has come from extremists.

The pro-Western, pro-U.S. government of President Hamid Karzai also has put its foot down after deciding local norms were violated.

In April, the Ministry of Culture and Information banned five popular Indian soap operas, saying they violated Islamic and Afghan values. Afghan television networks had dubbed the shows into local languages and edited out anything offensive — revealing shots of women, references to Hindu practices and alcohol consumption — but their efforts were not enough.

The ban is before the Afghan attorney general and may go to court.

In March, the lower house of parliament called for an end to dancing and other "un-Islamic" practices on television. The resolution passed after the nation's No. 1 television network — privately run Tolo TV — aired men and women dancing together onstage at a film awards show.

The staff of Tolo TV — founded in 2004 by Afghan-Australian entrepreneur Saad Mohseni and his siblings — has reacted to the climate of oppression by using it as creative inspiration.

Behind stone walls and barbed wire at the Tolo headquarters, there's a buzzing newsroom; a garden where writers sit alone brooding over scripts; and a canteen where women in jeans and men in T-shirts and sunglasses trade ideas and gossip.

Each Wednesday night, Tolo airs Danger Bell, one of its most popular programs. Comedian Hanif Hamgam uses satirical songs, skits and gags to skewer politicians of all stripes.

"I don't respect anybody," he says. "No matter how tragic the news, people must laugh."

One of Hamgam's favorite targets is Culture Minister Abdul Karim Khurram, installed two years ago with fundamentalist support.

"I always criticize the culture minister," Hamgam says. "He is an

uncultured guy."

Tolo,
convinced that Khurram is an enemy of free expression, has been broadcasting video of the minister declaring that "all this stuff … which they bring to us from the West and from Europe and call it freedom of speech and so on — this is just useless talk."

Khurram,
a onetime follower of fundamentalist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, says the comments were taken out of context; he says he was critiquing someone else's view, not expressing his own.

"I
have lived in the West," the French-educated minister says. "I want the same rights for Afghans."

Khurram
says some shows do go too far — showing unveiled women, singing, dancing and religions other than Islam.

"These
things are not reasonable in our culture," Khurram says. "University professors, religious scholars and students all complained that they are not fit for Afghan families."

Tolo
programming manager Hussain Naikzaid counters, "We haven't had complaints from ordinary people."

On
the campus of Kabul
University, accounting
student Ahmed Shekib Noor, 20, says he likes watching Indian soap operas and admires Afghan Star finalist Lima Sahar.

Noor
doesn't understand why clerics want to banish singing and dancing from the airwaves.

"This
is a democracy," he says. "Why shouldn't they sing?"