

## Afghan culture war looms

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A recently banned Indian soap opera shown in Afghanistan reflects the growing clash of cultures within the country's borders and the struggle over freedom of speech, writes Deirdre Tynan for EurasiaNet.

By

Deirdre Tynan for EurasiaNet (13/05/08)

On the battlefields of southern and eastern Afghanistan, Islamic insurgents are struggling to persevere in the face of the formidable firepower of NATO and American forces. In the country's culture war, however, religious radicals are poised to achieve a spectacular victory, according to two self-styled free speech advocates.

"What we are seeing is the re-Talibanization [of Afghanistan] [...] by stealth," said Saad Mohseni, whose family controls the Moby Media Group, the operator of independent television and radio stations in Afghanistan. "Socially and culturally, they seem to be achieving their goals."

An ongoing controversy involving two Indian-made drama series broadcast on one of the Moby group's television stations is developing into a key test for Afghanistan's democratization process. Religious radicals, many of them from the southern Pashtun belt that is oriented toward Pakistan, are bitterly opposed to the Indian dramas, even though they are hugely popular &ndash; with as many as one out of every three Afghans tuning in every week.

President Hamid

Karzai's government is bowing to the pressure exerted by the ultra-conservatives, and, in turn, the Ministry of Information and Culture is calling on Moby to pull the plug on the shows, contending that the "un-Islamic" soap operas are offensive to Afghan sensibilities. The Moby executives dispute the Culture Ministry's assertion, citing the fact that 90 percent of television sets in the country tune into the programs when they are on.

Saad Mohseni,

along with his brother Jahid, also a director of the media group, have been touring the United States

to draw attention to the free-speech crisis. In New York, recently, the duo said the culture clash between advocates of civil society and the country's radical conservative element was reaching "a dangerous stage."

The problem from the Mohsenis' perspective is two-pronged: According to Saad Mohseni, "a small group of individuals has hijacked the system," and the determined action by zealots has, in turn, exposed a serious flaw in the country's nascent republican system of government. "There doesn't seem to be a system of checks and controls on government actions," he said. "There's no [government] leadership on this issue."

Without Karzai taking an active role in the debate, the radicals have been able to gain the initiative. "The voice of reason always tends to be drowned out by radicals," Jahid Mohseni added.

The Mohseni brothers have vowed that Moby media, via its Tolo TV channel, will continue broadcasting the Indian dramas &ndash; "Tulsi" and "Kasauti Zindagi Kay" &ndash; until the government can provide a legal basis for the Culture Ministry's ban. They suggest the complacency exhibited by the president on the issue is connected to a desire to weaken independent media outlets in advance of the 2009 general election, as well to mollify hard-line elements within the government. The Mohseni brothers also noted that several top presidential aides and advisers have ties to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who led a CIA-financed, ultra-conservative militia during the war of resistance against Soviet occupation, and who subsequently was branded an international terrorist by the State Department.

Tolo TV, and more broadly the Moby Media Group, is no stranger to controversy having produced an Afghan "Pop Idol" featuring both male and female performers, topical talk shows and news programs that have been recognized internationally for their quality and professionalism. Moby, with its two television channels, controls roughly 70 percent of Afghanistan's broadcast market share, along with a 60 percent market share for its radio stations. The group's media dominance makes it a natural target for other groups, and the political-business forces behind them, that are seeking to capture a larger audience for themselves.

The Mohseni brothers insist that the media group has taken care to ensure all programming is culturally sensitive. "They've banned the serials without any thought, but we've been editing them and pixelating certain scenes right from the get go," Jahid Mohseni said in an interview with EurasiaNet. "The shows are very conservative. There's nothing in them that we believe is contrary to Islam. If they are going to ban Indian serials, they should ban all Indian serials, not just one or two."

The station remains open to working with the Culture Ministry to address official complaints. But authorities have yet to specify their gripes, the Mohseni

brothers assert. "If the Ministry has it all figured out and it's a legal issue, tell us what the problem is. They are fully dubbed shows, so we can edit them. If it's an issue with the story line, we might be able to fix that too. From our point of view it's got nothing to do with an actual problem with Islam, it's about harassing free media," Jahid Mohseni said.

Karin Karlekar, a senior media analyst with Freedom House who oversaw the production of this year's Freedom of the Press index, agrees with the Mohsenis' assessment of the dispute. "The ban is part of a larger attempt to undermine freedom of expression," Karlekar said.

"It's particularly worrying because we had seen positive changes Afghanistan recently," Karlekar continued. "Commentators have pointed out that some factions of the government maybe trying to deal with the Taliban, and are catering to more conservative trends. I would definitely not rule out linking this to elections."

The Afghan National Journalists Union and Nai, an Afghan media development organization with significant media law expertise, have both called on the government to back away from meddling with programming. "If such actions continue, this will signal Afghanistan's legislative powers are starting to engage in censorship," said Nai Executive Director Mujeeb Khalwatgar. "This is not appropriate for a government which claims it is working to promote democracy."

Saad Mohseni said the advocates of civil society could not afford to be complacent. Perhaps the only way to get the Culture Ministry to reverse its ban would be to pressure on Karzai personally, and the only way to do that effectively is to have such pressure come directly from the Bush administration, he said. "The Afghan government is in a defiant mood," Saad Mohseni said, adding that future assistance to Afghanistan's reconstruction should be conditioned on the Karzai administration's upholding basic civil society tenets.

"We have to be proactive," Saad Mohseni said. "The outcome [of the failure to take a forceful stand] would be an Afghan government that resembles Taliban times."