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## A new group of fundamentalists tries to force its morality on cultural life in Afghanistan

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**A new group of fundamentalists tries to force its morality on cultural life in Herat.**

Ah, Herat, the pearl of Afghanistan, a city so steeped in culture that it was once said "you cannot stick out your leg without kicking a poet."

And now the site of a group of censors determined to impose restrictions on cultural life that would make the Taliban smile.

The "Morality and Knowledge Association" recently established in Herat wants to ban women's voices from the airwaves, remove the "corruption" of foreign movies and soap operas from Afghans' nightly viewing, and generally bring the media back into line with what they consider "Islamic principles and Afghan culture."

"Our enemies are driving our young men to visit prostitutes, and they make our sisters crave immodesty. They promote gambling, wine drinking and ruinous luxury. They destroy our economy and they mock our religion. They do this through the media," proclaim brightly colored posters now appearing all over Herat, in shops, on city walls and in other public places.

The association has about 60 staffers, says its director, Aminullah Mohtasem, all of whom work voluntarily.

"There has been such an increase in corruption since the foreigners came to Afghanistan that we finally had to inform the public about these conspiracies" said Mohtasem. "We are conducting public awareness programs to try somehow and solve these problems."

According to Mohtasem, the association is privately owned and supported "by good people," but he declined to give any further details.

Over the past few weeks the association has intensified its campaign against the media by sending members to various outlets to lobby for a stricter interpretation of Islamic culture when making programming choices.

In particular, they are against music by women singers, which they insist is prohibited by Islam. They also want to yank the wildly popular foreign soap operas that keep people from Kandahar to Badakhshan glued to their television sets every evening.

"We fight against corruption," said Zia Ahmad Fazeli, a volunteer at the association. "We send groups to mosques, schools and other public places to preach about the harm done by these anti-Islamic and anti-Afghan programs."

Herat's religious institutions are wholeheartedly behind the movement.

"This program is necessary for the reform of society," said Mir Farooq Hussein, who introduced himself as the spokesman for religious councils in western Afghanistan. "The danger from these media outlets is greater than the danger posed by foreign forces in Afghanistan."

According to Hussein, the association will issue three warnings to an offending media outlet, then, if no changes are made, they will decide what action to take.

However, Nematullah Sarwari, who heads the Information and Culture Department in Herat, said that any decisions about the media are the province of the government, not private organizations.

"No group can change the government's policy, because it is based on the Constitution," he said. "There are many media outlets in Herat province, but they are not airing programs which promote corruption," he said. "Our office has not received any complaints from the Council of Religious Scholars in this regard."

Nevertheless, Sarwari, whose office oversees the media, gives cautious approval to the association's aims.

"If this movement is genuine, and not being manipulated by someone, we will also cooperate with it," he said. "We, too, wish to root out corruption from our society."

The association is receiving a surprising amount of support in Herat, normally considered one of the more relaxed areas of Afghanistan. The Taliban, with their restrictive policies

on women and entertainment, were extremely unpopular in this province, which sits on the border with Iran and is in many ways under the influence of its larger, more prosperous neighbor. The Sunni Taliban were anathema to overwhelmingly Shia Iran during the years when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. But the Taliban are not the only religiously and socially conservative force in the country.

Even many of the province's media outlets are in agreement with the association's values.

"Airing women's voices and showing them dancing promotes corruption in society," said Khalil Ahmad, editor-in-chief of the Radio Faryad. "Our radio tries to avoid broadcasting women's voices, in order to avoid problems from religious groups."

He puts the blame for many of the ills plaguing Herat squarely on the media.

"Girls running away from home, boys turning to immorality and promiscuity, and an increase in crime in Herat province are all a matter of grave concern," he said. "The major cause of these problems is the media. Radio Faryad is already making efforts to cut down on corruption in society and fight against the invasion of foreign culture."

Homaira Habib, who heads Herat's only women's radio station, Radio Sahar, also says that she supports the association.

"I believe that [the association's] activities will help to strengthen the country's genuine culture and promote the airing of religious issues in the media," she said. "The negative aspects of foreign culture which promote corruption will be rooted out."

Habib declined to say whether women's singing would be completely banned from Radio Sahar.

There are, however, some voices protesting the increasing conservatism in Herat's media.

Abdul Qadir Rahimi, regional director of the Human Rights Commission, said that the association should stop attacking the media and pay more attention to the law.

"The Constitution of Afghanistan gives women the right to raise their voices in song," he said. "If groups like this act outside of the legal framework, it will cause chaos."

Article 22 of Afghanistan's Constitution bans all forms of discrimination based on gender, and states that men and women shall have equal rights and privileges under the law.

But it is a provision that is still honored more in the breach than in the observance. Women face a host of restrictions in their daily lives that are not visited on their male counterparts, a fact that Adela Kabiri, lecturer in journalism at Herat University, finds quite galling.

"When people talk about corruption in society, they always blame the women," she said. "They say that women should not sing, that they should respect hijab [the Islamic practice of veiling women]. Don't men sing? Don't they appear without head coverings? Evil is evil, whether done by a man or a woman."

Political analyst Basir Begzad is firmly opposed to the Morality and Knowledge Association, saying that its activities are an attack on democracy. He also traces responsibility to "neighboring countries" which in this western province is shorthand for Iran.

"If the media is not free in a society, it leads to dictatorship and despotism," he said. "This association is no different from the Taliban's Amr-e-bel Maruf (Committee for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue). "It has most likely been organized from some neighboring countries which oppose the presence of the international community in Afghanistan. Therefore they are targeting Afghanistan's democracy."

But the association is fighting a losing battle, says Jawad Tabesh, a prominent musician in Herat who also operates one of the country's only music training centers for women.

"This Morality and Knowledge Association cannot stop music in Afghanistan," he said. "Like it or not, the world is going forward. People today can watch whatever they want, and listen to whatever they want, through cable television, satellite dishes, and the internet."

The association has a right to its opinion, he added, but not to force its views on others.

"Those who are against women singing should just do their own thing, and we will do ours," he said. "They should take care of themselves, not everybody else."

Mina Ahmadi, 20 years old, has been taking voice lessons for the past two years. She glanced around nervously before answering.

"I want to tell these people that they are only hurting themselves," she said. "There are many worse crimes out there. Singing is the biggest corruption?"

Omed Samim, 22, is another Herati musician. He is not worried in the least by the Morality and Knowledge Association. "These actions cannot stop girls from singing," he said. "They would have to close down all television stations and all radios. Nowadays people can always just change the channel."