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Music Censorship in 2021: The silencing of a nation and its cultural identity

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Music and musicians once again face serious threats following Afghanistan's takeover by the Taliban in August this year. Over the past two decades, the theory and practice of traditional Afghan instruments, as well as other musical forms, has seen a remarkable revival after the destruction of the country's musical heritage during the 1990s, with skills being passed on to a new generation of performers. Now, musicians are once again being forced to relocate abroad. This means they will only be able to keep their musical heritage and identity alive from beyond Afghanistan's borders, jeopardising an already fragile but important recent shift in how music and musicians are perceived in Afghan society. Fabrizio Foschini looks at the hardships that have befallen Afghan musicians and the risks that music faces once again.

Report highlights:

- The protection of Afghan music, as well as its practice and performance, are not among the issues that foreign governments are attempting to safeguard against the Taliban's repressive rule. The report delves into why this lack of protection is such a critical factor for the future of music in Afghanistan.
- It was believed that the Taliban would more or less tolerate traditional Afghan music and that the censorship they imposed would largely affect more modern music. Yet music in all its forms, as well as its practice and performance, has been one of the first casualties following the Taliban's takeover.
- At the heart of this analysis is a look at the Taliban's past and present stance on music. The report looks at incidents involving music and musicians that have occurred since the Taliban's takeover. It notes that, even in the absence of an official ban, the Taliban have effectively brought an end to musical performances.
- The report examines how current circumstances might affect Afghanistan's music scene. While musicians are indeed being forced into exile, this in itself may not pose an immediate risk to the country's musical heritage, thanks to musicians abroad continuing to create music, as well as increased awareness and support by international institutions. Professional musicians who stayed back, however, face the brunt of the ban: they have not only lost their livelihoods, but a newfound respect from society is under threat.
- Finally, the report looks at the importance of music within Afghan national identity while highlighting that it still occupies an extremely fragile place in Afghan society. The author explores why banning music will erode its place in society and undermine its ability to unify a culturally diverse nation.

The unofficial ban on music is one of a number of political and social setbacks Afghanistan has endured since the fall of the Republic to the Taliban on 15 August 2021. Yet, despite extensive coverage by international media and initiatives to support musicians, music has not been on the agenda at diplomatic tables, where standards of governance and aid commitments are deliberated. (See the Campaign to Protect Afghanistan's Musicians [here](#).)

While some may consider the Taliban's ban on music as an attempt at cultural genocide (see, for example, [this piece](#) in the Art Newspaper), it seems unlikely that music will be a priority among the issues the international community is trying to safeguard. Before the Taliban takeover, the need to defend Afghanistan's cultural heritage would have received a lot of attention. However, given that people's most basic rights and freedoms are currently under threat, such concerns are no longer a priority.

In March, it appeared that music would become the latest victim of the war when the Ashraf Ghani government banned girls over the age of 12 from singing in public in an apparent attempt to bolster peace talks in Doha. At the time, civil society groups raised concerns that the government was ready to sacrifice certain civic freedoms to accommodate fundamentalist groups (see [here](#)). Back then, hundreds of Afghan women and girls protested against the ban, their voices summed up in the hashtag “#IamMySong” on Twitter (read more [here](#)). This local mobilisation and the international concerns it raised resulted in a lifting of President Ghani’s ruling.

Barely six months later, the prospects for meaningful opposition to the Taleban’s near-total ban on music look dim. But what are the roots of the Taleban’s prohibition on music and its consequences both now and in the future?

The new Taleban play an old song

The Taleban never publicised their official position on music during their 20-year war against the Afghan government. Musicians were occasionally targeted but most likely as a means of reasserting the Taleban’s authority in the first years of the insurgency (see for example [here](#)). In Taleban-held areas, the treatment of musicians depended largely on local commanders’ relationships with communities or the presence of musicians in areas under their control (See [this](#) report in the Telegraph).

Even when the Taleban punished musicians, either by silencing wedding parties and other celebrations or by destroying instruments, the reporting of these events often got lost in the slew of articles depicting other horrors from Afghanistan’s protracted war.

Taleban [attacks on musicians](#) were more evident in urban areas, where prominent Afghan musicians had been threatened and forced to relocate, such as Afghanistan’s first rock band, [Kabul Dreams](#).

Such attacks and intimidation tactics were, however, mostly aimed at foreign-sponsored educational and cultural institutions portrayed by the Taleban as promoting western or non-Islamic customs and values among the Afghan population. This was in line with the more nationalistic tones in Taleban propaganda. However, incidents such as the series of bombings and threats targeting music shops in Jalalabad showed the continuing presence of a fundamentalist ‘anti-music attitude among at least some of the Taleban (see this Guardian [report](#) from 2010).

Until the eve of the Taleban’s takeover, the impression was that traditional Afghan music would be tolerated and that their censorship would largely affect more modern forms of music and instruments (see BBC report [here](#)). In December 2020, a Taleban representative reportedly told a delegate representing the media at the Doha peace talks that “they wanted [the western-style music competition television show] Afghan Star closed down for good” (see [this](#) Forbes report).

However, a clearer glimpse of their future attitudes to music emerged once they consolidated their hold on towns which fell during their 2021 spring-summer offensive. In Balkh, for example, which they captured on 21 June, the Taleban implemented a ban on music. Local radio stations were only allowed to play religious chants and men caught listening to music in the bazaar were [reportedly](#) subjected to corporal punishments.

Musicians in Kabul had been facing difficulties even before the takeover. Many public performances were cancelled in the spring of 2021 due to Covid-19 and worsening security, especially at night. In at least one instance, musicians performing at a wedding on the city’s outskirts reported their vehicles being fired on when leaving the venue, the [Los Angeles Times](#) reported.

The days following the fall of the Republic on 15 August were marked by the destruction of musical instruments, either as a political message or acts of vandalism. This not only intimidates, it also takes away the means for people to earn their living, especially given how expensive and beloved instruments are. In the capital, unidentified armed men entered the Afghan National Institute of Music (ANIM), tried to steal the institute’s vehicles and reportedly destroyed a number of instruments (NPR reporting [here](#)). On 27 August, several pianos and *tabla* were smashed when a Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) studio was vandalised (see, for example, [this](#) India Today report). In Jalalabad, the Taleban targeted music shops, reportedly as early as 15 August, the day they entered the city. They [doused](#) instruments with petrol, set them on fire in the city’s streets and ordered musicians to find other jobs. Music shops across the country were closed down within days and have remained so ever since (see [here](#)).

In an event that shocked the nation on 27 August, Taleban fighters took Fawad Andarabi, a player of the *ghichak*, a type of bowed lute, from his home and shot him dead (see [here](#)). The fact that the killing happened during the Taleban’s military offensive in Panjshir by way of the Andarab valley did not diminish the significance of this event. Fawad Andarabi had been at home when Taleban fighters, who had already paid him a visit, returned and summarily executed him (see [here](#)).

Since then, there have been occasional reports of incidents involving musicians or performances. For example, Kabuli musicians told AAN that a duo of *dhol* (percussion) and *sorna* (woodwind) players were on their way to a wedding when the Taleban stopped them near the old city's main roundabout and broke their instruments. On 17 September, an Afghan journalist (@TajudenSoroush) reported on Twitter that Taleban militants had overrun a wedding party in Takhar province and beaten up a group of female musicians who were playing for an all-female audience.

More recently, on 29 October, gunmen introducing themselves as Taleban opened fire on a wedding in Surkhrod district in Nangrahar after guests tried to stop them from smashing loudspeakers, killing at least two people and injuring ten others. The couples getting married in the joint ceremony had [reportedly](#) received permission from a local Taleban commander to play recorded music in the area reserved for women. The Taleban have sought to distance themselves from the incident and later [announced](#) they had arrested two of the perpetrators, saying the attack had started because of a personal feud.

Like many of the Taleban's new legal provisions, their ban on music has not been officially announced or explained; it has emerged over time through a series of declarations, prohibitions and measures (see [this](#) Gandhara report). Taleban spokesmen, for example, have denounced music as un-Islamic (see Newsweek report [here](#)) and Taleban officials have met the owners of hotels, restaurants and wedding halls in Kabul and instructed them to avoid live music. As Zabihullah Mujahed [told](#) The New York Times: "Music is forbidden in Islam ... but we're hoping that we can persuade people not to do such things, instead of pressuring them."

However, the forms of 'persuasion' employed have not excluded force: Afghan musicians and DJs have been repeatedly intimidated and subject to violence by Taleban – although individuals were arguably acting beyond their mandate in the case of the worst attacks. They have also seen their instruments and professional paraphernalia destroyed. At this rate, the Taleban may succeed in convincing musicians to give up their profession, without the government having to announce a ban officially (see [this](#) AP report). What is certain, is that many musicians are nowadays burying their instruments and trying to leave the country.

Censorship of music and diaspora of musicians

Before the war, according to ethnomusicologist Professor John Baily, even in a relatively provincial setting such as Herat in the 1970s, "censure of music was seen as a thing of the past" (see his [2001 report](#) *Can you stop the birds singing?*). The Taleban may be re-introducing parts of the 1964 constitution as a legal framework for their government (see media report [here](#)), but they seem to be drawing on the tenets of a more recent past when they were in power between 1996-2001. Their current attitude towards music appears to be the same as the one they adopted then – rejection of most forms of music. Music is seen as something that is 'dangerous', distracting the mind from religion and causing people to have sinful thoughts. This attitude sums up the intolerance to music already shown by many mujahedin groups during and after the war against the Soviets, who saw it as something 'light' or ill-suited to the grieving atmosphere of a country mourning its martyrs. Music runs counter to the 'puritan' nature of the early Taleban movement, deeply entrenched in fundamentalist religious views. The global debate on the role of music in Islam has been a long and complex one among movements arguing for a re-Islamisation of societies. The Taleban's position on the issue can hardly shift from the previously held stance without an explicit elaboration, which is unlikely to happen at this stage and without a valid reason.

The Taleban's own use of music, which has been the subject of a number of studies over the past decade, has almost exclusively focused on *tarana* – poems in praise of their fighters ^[1]Most recently, this included a music [video clip](#) showing the Taleban's elite Badri 313 Unit enacting a military operation at Kabul airport in the wake of the US withdrawal on 31 August. grounded in melodies and texts deeply rooted in Pashtun folk culture, but unaccompanied by instruments. The absence of instruments is a major criterion for the perceived lawfulness of music by the movement. ^[2]The presence of instruments has often been regarded as the main factor distinguishing music from poetry. The solely vocal Taleban tarana, sharing both poetic and musical forms of the metric and ... Continue reading These *tarana* became a major propaganda tool for the Taleban during their nearly two-decades-long insurgency, possibly one of central importance for winning the fight "for hearts and minds" of Pashtun youths in Afghanistan and Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. They had, however, already been composed and performed by the Taleban in the 1990s. ^[3]The Taleban *tarana*, in particular their content and metric rather than their melodic aspects, have been analysed by a number of scholars. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Apart from the *tarana*, the only other forms of musical performance endorsed by the Taleban are compositions in their praise or strictly devotional music (see [here](#)) such as the *marsyeh* (requiem) or *na't* (a recitation in praise of the Prophet Muhammad). Yet once again, the distinction seems to be largely between vocal and instrumental performances, rather than devotional versus secular, as the

musical gatherings at the Sufi Chishti Khanaqah in Old Kabul, a devotional practice considered as *ghaza-ye ruh* (food for the soul) have all but stopped since the Taleban's takeover. (See the author's piece about the music scene in Old Kabul [here](#).)

Economic hardship and fear of the future play an even more critical role than direct Taleban threats in the decision by many traditional musicians to leave. The author has spoken to several musicians from the Kharabat community (see this AAN [report](#)) about the loss of their livelihoods. Previously, they had either enjoyed stable contracts with TV channels, such as Tolo or Ariana, or made a living playing at venues or giving music lessons. All of these forms of income are now gone. Those playing for TV studios have been told to stay at home and look for other jobs, with no promise of support by the government. The situation is just as bleak for the many instrument makers whose workshops in downtown Kabul are now closed.

This mutilated music scene leaves musicians few, if any, avenues for earning an income or pursuing artistic expression. As a result, musicians have been trying to leave the country (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Dozens of musicians, mostly from Kabul and Jalalabad, have already moved to Peshawar, much like their families did between 1996-2001. However, those who have settled there are now lamenting the lack of work opportunities and support (see [here](#)).

This residual safety valve for Afghan musicians is precarious. In the past few weeks, as a consequence of tightly-controlled borders, the paucity of outbound commercial flights and the sheer numbers of those trying to leave, costs have sky-rocketed. A Pakistani visa, which used to cost 15 USD, is now 350 USD on the black market, while airplane tickets, when they can be bought, had gone from a few hundred dollars to 1,200 USD by the end of September. Afghan journalist Khalil Minawi tweeted on 10 October (@khminawi) that tickets were now selling at 2,500 USD. Other musicians, mostly from the north and west of the country, are trying to cross into Iran, across tightly controlled borders. Now the Taleban represent another obstacle in addition to the one posed by neighbouring countries' border guards. At least one musician, a young man from Badakhshan who sang and played the stringed instrument, the *dambura*, was [killed](#) by Iranian border police while attempting to cross the border illegally.

Outside Afghanistan, meanwhile, human rights groups and art institutions are [advocating](#) for the establishment of channels to help Afghan artists and cultural workers leave the country. In an open letter [published](#) in the Sunday Times on 3 October, a group of mostly UK-based academics and musicians [urged](#) the British government to grant humanitarian visas to musicians. The initiative has received the support of several MPs from Northern Ireland, and plans are [reportedly](#) underway to make room for musicians at risk in the Northern Ireland Resettlement Scheme. Importantly, the campaign's objectives also list the need for the Taleban to guarantee the rights of musicians and let them pursue their profession unhindered *inside* Afghanistan.

Helping Afghan musicians relocate must be understood as an emergency plan to help those individuals, that leaves many behind. For exiled contemporary pop musicians, at least those with established audiences, exile by itself will not represent a major obstacle to their careers, assuming that the Taleban are not able to prevent Afghans from accessing music on the internet at home. In the 1990s and 2000s, many Afghan pop stars were forced or opted to relocate to the US, Europe or countries across Asia. This often contributed to a greater output of musical production, both in terms of quantity and quality.

When it comes to traditional musicians, however, one cannot help but wonder how many will be able to carry on, what will happen to traditional forms of music and what will be the overall effect of such displacement on Afghanistan's music scene. A whole sphere of Afghan culture was only just picking itself up after the civil war and the Taleban rule of the 1990s. It was on the road to recovery but is endangered once again.

Music's critical place in Afghan society

The risk now is not of Afghanistan's musical heritage disappearing. On the contrary, thanks to the exposure it has received given its endangered status, traditional Afghan music has a legion of fans worldwide, links to global audiences and a newly-established wealth of archived recordings and textual knowledge. What is at risk is the future status of music and its role *inside Afghanistan*.

Music is engrained within the Afghan identity and yet it occupies an extremely fragile place in society. In a religiously conservative society, music's position has traditionally been limited to entertainment rather than being seen as an art form in its own right. While Afghans throughout the country, including conservative rural areas, can be as passionate about music as anywhere else in the world, attitudes towards it have tended to shift when times of war have called for an end to celebrations. This happened a great deal over the last few decades and has served to justify the bans enforced, first on the pretext of national mourning by mujahedin parties, and later, in a much more aggressive and comprehensive way, by the Taleban. Moreover, few families see music as an acceptable career prospect for their children in terms of social status; neither is it an economically viable form of

income. Performing music as a profession has long been associated with low-income communities, trades such as barbers or, in Kabul, for example, the descendants of the Indian musicians who settled there in the 1860s. Outside of these often kinship-related groups, music as a form of entertainment or artistic enterprise has been limited to relatively few individuals whose numbers were further reduced, especially in rural areas, with the onset of conflict in the 1970s.

As elsewhere in the world, music can be a transversal element, bringing together individuals from different social groups. Not only is its value as a universal language recognised, but the *ustad* (teacher) to *shagerd* (disciple) connection is not limited to a community of professional performers. It is open to amateurs from all social strata and can create links across society. Musical venues, too, such as the private homes of music patrons as well as public ones usually connected to popular forms of devotion, helped bring together individuals from different walks of life. However, a lightly discriminatory attitude towards musicians – especially those performing on traditional instruments – was still prevalent, once a concert was over. This only began to change a few years ago.

Indeed, one of the effects of decades of war has been a lack of interest in traditional instruments, particularly among young Afghans. The roots of Afghan pop music originate partly from a form of 'light' classical music, the *ghazal*, and partly from local folk music. Contemporary pop musicians tend to follow this pattern and sometimes record new versions of old classics. However, until a few years ago, most would rearrange songs with new instruments and heavily synthesised sounds. This influenced both professional musicians, who saw employment opportunities in new instruments coming from abroad, and amateurs moving away from traditional instruments. This trend was only recently partially reversed, after the threat posed to Afghan music during the 1990s raised concerns about its very survival, and traditional instruments experienced a revival among younger people. Despite the conflict, Afghanistan re-emerged once again on the international stage and its cultural output, especially its musical heritage, began to feature prominently in this renewed global interest. In turn, the process occasioned recognition of the role played by musicians in society.

This happened to a large degree thanks to the efforts of Afghan musicians and music lovers generously supported by organisations interested in preserving cultural heritage, such as the Agha Khan Trust for Culture. In particular, since its foundation by Afghan ethnomusicologist Dr Ahmad Sarmast in 2010, the role of the Afghan National Institute of Music (ANIM) has been central. [ANIM](#) was founded as a co-educational secondary school, an almost unique format in Afghanistan. It allowed students from all social and economic backgrounds to gain advanced education and develop their musical talents and skills on a range of Afghan and international instruments. Moreover, besides its highly committed and skilled international teachers, ANIM benefited from the outstanding talent and experience of professional Afghan musicians and educated music scholars.

Since the Taliban takeover in August, ANIM has been closed (see [here](#)). The Taliban have put a security detail to guard the institute and its belongings. Most of its foreign teachers left the country in April after the announcement of the US withdrawal deadline (see [here](#)), while some of their Afghan colleagues tried to get on evacuation flights. More than one hundred of its students, including members of the first all-female Afghan orchestra, were able to fly out in early October, first to Qatar and then to Portugal (see [here](#)). Those who could not get out are now living in fear of persecution, wondering whether they will ever be able to return to their previous life (read a recent testimony [here](#)).

It is unclear when or where the school will resume its activities or whether its previous capacity to reach out to young Afghans will ever be replicated. (Read the Wall Street Journal's [interview](#) with ANIM's founder in the wake of the Taliban victory.)

Foreign governments could work harder to evacuate and resettle musicians, but this will not be enough to prevent the risks music faces in Afghanistan as a consequence of the Taliban takeover. Afghan society's newfound esteem for music, a hard-won gain of the last decade, could easily be overturned and lost under the pressure of Taliban censorship. Even in the unlikely event that the Taliban might one day adopt a more tolerant attitude towards certain types of music, the lack of official support for the study and performance of music, along with its relegation to a class of undesirable and disreputable activities, would still pose a serious threat, jeopardising the progress made in restoring and rejuvenating an ancient musical tradition. For this momentum not to be lost, musicians must be able to pursue their careers and interests inside their home country.

As ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin once argued, when discussing the role of radio in spreading the music recorded in Kabul to all provinces in the 1950-60s, that music for Afghanistan represented "one of the few manifestations of an emerging pattern of national values and expression that may eventually comprise a pan-ethnic, distinctively Afghan society" (see Slobin, Mark. [Music in Contemporary Afghanistan](#). Praeger Publishers, 1974, p248). The Taliban, who have largely appropriated the language and themes of Afghan nationalism as propaganda tools, are now undermining one of the very tenets of Afghan national identity, "one of the structures," as John Baily put it, "that held together Afghanistan in the past."

If the Afghan music that developed in Kabul in the mid-20th century was born of a blend of mainly Pashtun and Tajik cultural elements, the process has continued. In recent years, many regional styles of music, from Hazarajat to Badakhshan, have experienced both a local revival and received national recognition, with elements peculiar to this or that style picked up and featured as 'guest', or even integrated more regularly, in mainstream Kabul-based productions. This was seen at a more sophisticated level, the Winter Music Academy, a two-month-long seminar and festival [organised](#) by ANIM since 2010. It could be termed, to borrow Professor Baily's words once again, "deep processes of national cohesion." However, this push towards inclusiveness and reciprocal knowledge has by no means been limited to music scholars and practitioners.

Anybody familiar with Afghan music over the past 20 years will have noticed the fascination of many contemporary pop singers and their audiences with distinct musical patterns and instruments from different parts of the country. Through the celebration of these diverse musical traditions, musicians have contributed to the growth of respect and equity among Afghan communities.

Music in Afghanistan has a unique potential for countering communal and ethnic rifts that the Taliban themselves denounce and claim to oppose. Their attempts at stifling a national identity in the making, one proceeding from mutual recognition and enjoyment of diverse Afghan cultural traditions, does not bode well for the country's future.

Edited by Emilie Jelinek and Roxanna Shapour

References[+]

- ↑1 Most recently, this included a music [video clip](#) showing the Taliban's elite Badri 313 Unit enacting a military operation at Kabul airport in the wake of the US withdrawal on 31 August.
The presence of instruments has often been regarded as the main factor distinguishing music from poetry. The solely vocal Taliban *tarana*, sharing both poetic and musical forms of the metric and structure of the *ghazal* and *chaharbeiti*, seems to be considered more akin to a
- ↑2 literary genre than to songs. Poetry itself has not always fared well with Islamist or religious fundamentalist movements, but it holds its ground better than music in conservative rural Pashtun society. Forms of vocal recitation are associated with a number of more or less orthodox religious practices, such as the call to prayer and some Sufi ceremonies.
- ↑3 The Taliban *tarana*, in particular their content and metric rather than their melodic aspects, have been analysed by a number of scholars. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

References

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