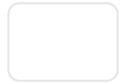


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'Nothing Left' For Herat Shopkeepers After Taliban Bans Music, Foreign Films, Video Games

By [Shahpoor Saber](#)

Twenty-eight-year-old Humayun invested his entire savings of \$10,000 to open his own arcade in the western Afghan city of Herat nearly four years ago.

The investment initially paid off as the powerful gaming consoles in his shop attracted young Heratis who spent considerable amounts of money to play the latest versions of the most popular video games.

Then came a downturn after the fundamentalist Taliban returned to power in August 2021. Mounting unemployment and a sharp economic downturn took a heavy toll on all Afghans, including potential customers among the city's half a million or so people.

Then suddenly, last week, it was "game over" for Humayun and other enterprising shopkeepers.

That's when authorities shuttered his arcade and hundreds of other businesses after the Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice banned video games, foreign films, and music in Herat, branding them as un-Islamic.

"This business was my life," Humayun told RFE/RL's Radio Azadi. "I no longer have a source of income or a livelihood."

The Taliban's prohibition, which came without warning, has forced more than 400 businesses in Herat to close.

It followed crackdowns on other forms of leisure and entertainment that clash with the Taliban's extremist interpretation of Islamic Shari'a law. Earlier [this month](#), also in Herat, the Taliban closed restaurant gardens for women and families.

In October, the group shut cafes offering hookahs -- the smoking of which is a popular pastime among Afghan men -- across the country. In May, the Taliban banned men and women from eating together

in Herat's restaurants and shut down women-owned and women-run restaurants in the city.

The hard-line Islamist group has aggressively reimposed draconian restrictions on how Afghans can appear in public and how men and women interact, reminiscent of its brutal reign through the late 1990s before it was displaced by a U.S.-led military invasion and a UN-backed government for two decades.

The impact of Taliban restrictions on businesses is conspicuous in Herat, an ancient center of cultural and intellectual life in the Muslim world that lies at a strategic crossroads leading to Iran and Turkmenistan.

In the years before the Taliban retook power in August 2021, Hazratha Market was the center of video gaming in Herat. Scores of shops lining narrow corridors also sold foreign films and TV serials on DVD. They offered Indian, Iranian, and Western music on CDs and cassettes.

But the once-teeming market that echoed with Afghan and Iranian music has now fallen silent and almost all its shops are closed.

"I have nothing left here, and now I must move to another country," said a former shopkeeper named Fakhruddin. His store sold movie posters, DVDs, and music CDs.

He says his nearly \$3,000 investment in the business is doomed. "I am providing for an 11-member family, and this shop was my only livelihood," he told Radio Azadi.

The officials of the Taliban's morality police in Herat are adamant that closing game arcades and movie and music shops was the right thing to do.

Mawlawi Azizurrahman Mohajir, the provincial head of the Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, said the authorities closed the gaming parlors after many families complained that their children were wasting time there.

"These shops were selling films that depicted and promoted Indian and Western values and culture, which are very different from Afghan culture and traditions," he told Radio Azadi.

Mohajir, too, repeated the familiar Taliban argument that it considers such everyday leisure activities un-Islamic.

"The films they were selling did not have women in hijab, which is against Shari'a," he said, referring to the strict interpretation of the Islamic dress code that the Taliban insists be followed in Afghanistan. "This is why the sale of such films is prohibited."

Since assuming power, the Taliban has attempted to recreate its hard-line, mostly unrecognized emirate from the 1990s and abrogated promises of moderation, tolerance, and openness that their leaders had made in recent years. Perhaps nowhere has the recent crackdown been more severe than in strictures on women and girls, including [bans on education](#) and many jobs that the United Nations and countless rights groups have [condemned](#).

But leisure time has been another major target of Taliban restrictions. The group has banned Afghan women from public parks and bathhouses. It has forbidden live music and has publicly beaten and

humiliated Afghan musicians. Afghan television stations can only broadcast programming approved by the Taliban, which has forced female news presenters to [cover their faces](#) by wearing masks.

Beyond declaring such activities off-limits to tens of millions of Afghans, the bans and restrictions have a crippling effect on thousands of businesses across the country.

"The closure of one business sector in a city can directly impact hundreds of families or indirectly affect hundreds more," Abdul Qudous Khatibi, an economist in Herat, told Radio Azadi.

An association of audio and video shops in Herat said the ban has closed more than 350 businesses there. Arcade owners estimate there were more than 60 such gaming centers in the city.

Since he's had to close his shop, Humayun said he is exploring his options for the dangerous and illegal journey into one of Afghanistan's neighboring countries.

"I now face a real game of life and death," he said.

Written by Abubakar Siddique based on reporting by RFE/RL Radio Azadi correspondent Shahpoor Saber

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Austrian Red Cross Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)	Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien T +43 1 589 00 583 F +43 1 589 00 589 info@ecoi.net	Contact Imprint & Disclaimer F.A.Q. Data Protection Notice
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