

# Scenario 239

## CULTURAL VALUES RE-DEFINED IN KABUL

**On 17<sup>th</sup> August 2021;** two days after the taking over, the Taliban declared an '*amnesty*' across Afghanistan and urged women to join their government, trying to calm nerves across the tense capital city of Kabul that only the day before saw chaos at its airport as people were seen mad to flee the Taliban rule.

The comments by *Enamullah Samangani*, a member of the Taliban's Cultural Commission, were the first comments on governance from a federal level across the country after their blitz across the country. While there were no major reports of abuses or fighting in Kabul, many residents stayed home but remained fearful after the insurgents' takeover saw prisons emptied and armouries vacated. Older generations remember the Taliban's ultra-conservative views during their earlier rule [1996-2001].

Back then, women were barred from attending schools or working places outside their homes. They had to wear the all-encompassing *burqa* and be accompanied by a male nearest available relative [called *mehram*] whenever they went outside. The Taliban banned music, cut off the hands of thieves and stoned adulterers. Mr *Samangani* said:

*"The Islamic Emirate doesn't want women to be victims. They should be in government structure according to Shariah law. The structure of government is not fully clear, but based on experience, there should be a fully Islamic leadership and all sides should join. Our people are Muslims and we are not here to force them to adopt our religion Islam."*

The Taliban had sought to project greater moderation in recent years, but many Afghans remained sceptical. The world followed events in Afghanistan with a heavy heart and deep disquiet about what was ahead; UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was seen more worried. A resolute US President Joe Biden stood squarely behind his decision to withdraw American forces and acknowledged the '*gut-wrenching*' images unfolding in Kabul. Biden said that:

“.....he faced a choice between honouring a previously negotiated withdrawal agreement or sending thousands more troops back to begin a third decade of war. After 20 years, I’ve learned the hard way that there was never a good time to withdraw US forces.”

**Biden’s televised address** from the White House on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2021 is referred.

However, despite the Taliban’s statement in earlier paragraphs, there was a disturbing column in the **Washington Post** of 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021 telling:

- An Afghan artist in Kabul buried 15 paintings — all works of modern art depicting women — in his compound three days after the Taliban entered the capital.
- A well-known film-maker carried the same fear. Before she fled the country, she tucked away a large hard drive with more than 20 films in a secret location.
- And an aging bookseller in his tiny sidewalk shop concealed every book the militants consider damning; including two Bibles, translated into Dari and Pashto.

The main fear remained that *‘if the Taliban fighters found this, they would punish me’*. And so went the cultural unravelling of Afghanistan’s capital six weeks into the Taliban’s resurgence. The Taliban’s return to power — and its history of destroying precious art and relics it considered blasphemous — reopened the psychic wounds of the past, at once triggering anxiety and efforts by individual Afghans to protect their masterpieces. It was a different interpretation of **Afghan Culture** near most Taliban members – quite opposite to the **Islamic Culture**.

### **THREATS TO ART & CULTURE:**

The past 20 years of Western presence ushered in developing of arts, film, music and books, helping to transform Kabul into a cosmopolitan metropolis. A new generation of artists was influenced as much by Afghan traditions and history as by modern themes such as the war, Western music and women’s rights. The Taliban rulers didn’t decree what shape and form art and culture would be permitted to take shape in the new Afghanistan.

Many artists feared they would soon be governed by a hard-line vision of Islamic righteousness that could reverse the gains they enjoyed in

freedoms of expression, speech and ideas over the past two decades. Sahra Karimi, a filmmaker in Kabul expressed:

*"The kind of art that we believe has a value means artists should be free to express their own thoughts, not under dictatorship or censorship. Those artists will not easily be able to work as freely as they used to do. And they were so free.*

*Even as some artists take great risks to protect their creations, many have fled the country, while others are self-censoring to avoid the wrath of the Taliban."*

Some artists had already destroyed their paintings or sculptures; stores selling musical instruments have shuttered, as had many art galleries. Wedding bands and singers stopped working as many wedding halls cancelled live music to not anger the Taliban. Afghan filmmaking went totally dead. Safiullah Habibi, the Director of Kabul's Fine Arts Institute [a government facility] told that:

*"The Taliban have not issued any statement or directions regarding the arts. But artists themselves are limiting themselves. They think the Taliban will repeat what happened in the 1990s. At that time, the arts had no place in their rule;"* **Sudarsan Raghavan's** report in **WP** of 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021 is referred.

**Rules 'framework' underway:** The classrooms of a few art schools in Kabul had gone empty just after Taliban's take-over. Bilal Karimi, the Taliban deputy spokesman, said the interim government was new and still '*making a framework*' for all issues concerning arts & culture; adding that:

*"Whether a form of art would be permissible or prohibited would be governed by Islamic law and **Shariah**. The knowledgeable people will formulate the rules, keeping in view the religious, national and historical traditions for art and cultural heritage - and whether these issues are in line with the Islamic laws or against them."*

Few Afghans expected the Taliban to fully return to its own cultural values of the mid-1990s, when it first came to power. Then the group had prohibited television, radio, movies and other forms of entertainment, declaring them immoral and socially corruptive. Their religious morality wing of police had confiscated or smashed television sets, videocassette recorders, cameras, videos and satellite dishes. Violators were given

public beatings. In 2001, in the months before the Taliban was toppled following the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban had banned the Internet, too.

In 2021, the Taliban deployed sophisticated social media campaigns on **Twitter** and other Internet platforms. Taliban officials gave interviews on television and radio, and answered questions on **WhatsApp**. Their fighters in Kabul were spotted with smart-phones, taking selfies and videos. To be sure, the Taliban's lack of clarity on their cultural vision created a landscape of contradictions in Kabul.

In few neighbourhoods, art galleries remained open, though few customers come because of fear and collapsing economy situations around. On Fridays at the city's only five-star hotel, paintings of women and animals were seen on display for sale, as visiting Taliban officials walked past. Music could also be heard floating softly out of some cars – speaking of tolerant attitudes of the Ruling Taliban. And no one opted to ransack the famous **National Museum of Afghanistan**, filled with thousands of ancient cultural artefacts, as they did during their previous rule.

Kabul's established artists noted that the new rulers were seeking to improve their image to get diplomatic recognition, unfreeze billions of funds and receive international aid to bolster their tanking economy and address a spreading humanitarian crisis.

In August 2021, Taliban fighters shot dead Afghan folk singer *Fawad Andarabi* in his mountain village north of Kabul, prompting Karima Bennouna, the senior-most UN official for cultural rights, to urge governments *to demand the Taliban respect the human rights of artists*. In Bamian province, Taliban fighters destroyed two statues of leaders revered by the ethnic Shiite Hazara minority. Amongst artists and painters, most people were hiding themselves, no doubt.

In an art school in Kabul, some of the teachers still come to work even though the students were avoiding the schools. At the Fine Arts Institute, what was forbidden during the Taliban's previous rule still hangs on the walls. In one picture, one of players mounted on horses engaged in *buzkashi*, a traditional sport. The Taliban used to consider portraits of living beings blasphemous – but this time they were behaving differently.

**'Artists are a big part of our society,'** said Habibi, seated in his office with a portrait of an eagle on the wall – but it was there by all means. He sought a meeting with a senior Taliban official in the Cultural

Ministry but couldn't get appointment. Habibi hoped to convince him that art was not against Islamic law and that the institute was preserving Afghan culture. It also helps strengthen the economy by training its 700 students — 90 percent of them female — to find jobs, he had plans to argue on.

During the last week of September 2021, a Taliban group visited the institute, saying they were from the Movement's Security Services. On the ground inside, they spotted a yellow sculpture, a reproduction of one of the famed giant *Buddhas of Bamian*. The original two 6th-century statues were carved into the side of a rock face in central Afghanistan. In March 2001, the Taliban had blown them up with explosives. Here in 2021, the Taliban agents were not pleased to see the reproduction either – saying it '*haram*' because it was of a human being. Mr Habibi, the Museum's Director told them that it was our cultural heritage.

**Danger of books:** Some volumes and books that could be considered problematic for the Taliban can still be found in the city's book market, including those on religion or politics. During the Taliban's previous era, they viewed any effort to convert Muslims to Christianity a crime worthy of death. So the Bibles are still tucked behind a bookshelf. Some Afghans, he said, buy them for research purposes.

The Taliban, this time, didn't publicly weigh in on which books they would consider socially acceptable. So, many of the booksellers removed books they believed the Taliban would not condone – being against *Shariah* laws, ones with racy titles or images of women on the covers. Some Afghans also removed sensitive books from their personal libraries, in the event Taliban fighters could raid their houses while others destroyed certain books on democracy, human rights and Western literature.

### **'THEY WILL DESTROY THE ....'**

Many artists in Kabul had kept their art works hidden in their homes since the Taliban took the capital. Before the Taliban seized control in August 2021, the staff of *Afghan Films - the state-run film company*, had more than 20 films in different stages of productions, including feature-length films, shorts and documentaries; said *Sahra Karimi*, the former head of Afghan Films. The second national film festival was ahead and the production was going on full bloom then - but had to discontinue due to Taliban's expected new policy and more because the government had no money in their kitty.

The staff members continued coming to work only to show their faces. Director *Karimi* had fears for the films in progress. The footage for two films left with editors who fled the country, but the rest were on the hard drive, which also contained photos, projects and other activities of the past two years. Director *Karimi* had to move to Slovakia after the change of government in August 2021.

In mid-1990s, the Taliban had banned moving images and destroyed reels of many films. However, *Sahra Karimi* confirmed later that:

*".... They are now no longer as much against film, viewing television, videos and social media but they do care about the content which should be devoutly Islamic. Independent filmmakers are not going to compromise....."*

Also of concern were decades of film archives — thousands of hours of film — that were being digitized. The archives were located inside the presidential palace, which was later occupied by the Taliban. Of course; the archives were in big danger – but not known what policy was coming up.

One artist could no longer visit the compound ***where he buried his 15 paintings***. It was inside a government complex, and Taliban fighters now guard it in routine. Since August [2021], he changed home because his neighbours knew he was an artist – and finally moved in the basement of a relative's house — along with 42 of his *other* paintings. Three days before the Taliban entered Kabul, he took them out of their frames, wrapped them up in a blanket and spirited them out of a gallery.

A singer got hidden his *dambura*, a traditional lute, along with his paintings, which mostly depict humans or animals. The 38-year-old artist told the WP's representative reporter that:

*"When we paint a human being or an animal, the Taliban says we give life and spirit to a piece of paper. Saving my own art is like saving my own life. More than a dozen of his artist friends are also in hiding."*

See a report dated 11<sup>th</sup> October 2021 published in Western media papers under the caption ***'After the Taliban seized their school, Afghanistan's all-female orchestra tried to flee. Only some escaped'***:

One *Shogofa Safi*, 17, a conductor and part of the **Zohra Orchestra** at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, left the country around

25<sup>th</sup> September 2021. Her other fellow girls came from homes broken by war and poverty to chase an unimaginable future as musicians. And with grit and determination they succeeded: Some played at Carnegie Hall; others at the Kennedy Centre. Many travelled the world as members of ***Afghanistan's only all-female orchestra***. On 14<sup>th</sup> August 2021, the girls were rehearsing for an upcoming concert in Colombia: next day, the Taliban seized Kabul and the girls' hopes evaporated. **Sudarsan Raghavan** wrote:

*"This happened to Afghanistan's first and the only music school and its renowned **Zohra Orchestra** after the Taliban's return to power. It was a traumatic experience that for many of the girls and teens are still ongoing, and whose conclusion remains far from certain.*

*Today, their school — the **Afghanistan National Institute of Music** — is a military base of the Haqqani network.....An evacuation operation launched in the last days of the war failed to get the girls and scores of other students and faculty out of the country before the US withdrawal was complete."*

The Taliban armed fighters often walked through the halls of the said Institute in Kabul. Once some student girls tried to escape out of the country but the Taliban stopped the girls' buses 55 yards from a US military-controlled gate into Kabul's international airport, they were sent back. A second attempt on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2021 succeeded in taking out roughly a third of the music school with the help of famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma and others. Those who escaped included two Zohra musicians interviewed by ***The Washington Post*** later. But the rest didn't have valid passports and remained trapped in the capital. An 18-year-old orchestra member, who was left behind, told:

*"I haven't practiced my violin since the day the Taliban came. The only life I want is one where I can freely play my violin. The travel documents have not been issued to me yet"*

The violinist was among the tens of thousands of Afghans left to fend for themselves under the Taliban, despite President Biden's description of the US evacuation of nearly 124,000 people as '*an extraordinary success.*'

Those who were left behind included female judges, women's rights activists, and former US military translators, artists, musicians and countless others who worked with the US or NATO forces during their stay in Afghanistan - many in hiding.

One *Wajiha Kabuli* joined [in 2015] the co-educational music school from an orphanage that funnelled in talented girls. A year earlier, the Taliban had killed her father, and her mother was ill and too poor to support her. Music was the only way to reach her goals, either financially or spiritually; now 17, a percussionist. Wajiha was in the Zohra Orchestra, which performed both traditional Afghan songs and classical music. As they toured the world, the 30-member ensemble became an emblem of Afghanistan's growing freedoms and opportunities for girls and women.

In December 2014, a suicide bomber targeted Kabul's ***French Cultural Centre***, where the school's students were performing at a musical play. The attack killed a German national and injured 15 others. The music school's director, Ahmad Naser Sarmast, was nearly killed but survived. The Taliban claimed responsibility describing the music as an insult to Islam. Mr Sarmast said.

*"My school was promoting gender equality, musical education, musical diversity, women's rights, girl's rights etc etc. Everything that our school was doing was against the Taliban's vision, perception and ideology."*

On the Taliban's taking over day, Shogofa Safi, 17, was playing the marimba in an orchestra rehearsal when two teachers entered. The Taliban were on the way. *'We fled the school,'* recalled Safi, who was also the orchestra's conductor.

That was the last time she and the other girls had seen their instruments.

### **EVACUATION OF ART LOVERS:**

Students at the music school were forced to leave their instruments behind after the Taliban took over. Within days, the school's supporters scrambled to get roughly 280 students and faculty out of the country. Portugal's government agreed to take in the musicians, and the group's backers made arrangements for them to be evacuated on a British military flight. On 27<sup>th</sup> August 2021, Kabuli, Safi and the 18-year-old violinist had received messages to pack their bags.

The next afternoon, seven buses carrying around 280 students and faculty from the school arrived at the airport gate. They were marked with an 'X' mark and Christmas signs to be identifiable by US soldiers, but between the American troops and the buses stood a Taliban checkpoint. Thousands of Afghans and foreigners, including US citizens



were also trying to flee the country. They were in a bus full of girls, and the Taliban were outside and they refused buses' entry inside.

Away from Afghanistan, several groups of the school's backers were following the drama through Zoom and WhatsApp, connected with bus drivers, faculty and US troops on the ground. After waiting for several hours at one gate, the convoy drove to another gate, where Taliban fighters again blocked their entry.

Some stalwart Americans and the Congress itself sought the help of Gen Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to help the convoy get inside the airport, he did the best but there was no approval from the Taliban. The US soldiers were dealing with dozens of similar clusters seeking to enter the airport. The buses returned to the first gate, where the girls remained overnight. In the early morning of 29<sup>th</sup> August, the buses were half a football field away from the gate where US soldiers were positioned.

Around the capital, Taliban fighters entered wedding halls, demanding live music be halted. They confiscated or damaged the instruments, declaring them 'haraam' or forbidden by Islamic law. Remarked one Taliban Commander that:

*"Music is not in our religion. Since the Islamic Emirate has taken over here, music has no longer a place here."*

Against this backdrop and after their ordeal at the airport, members of the **Zohra Orchestra** confined themselves in their homes. They worried neighbours would alert the Taliban or they would be recognized if they stepped outside. To keep her skills fresh, *Shagofa Safi* was taking an online class with a teacher based in England. She played an imaginary marimba by tapping her fingers on a table to music played on her tablet. She told that: *'When the Taliban sent the bus back, I lost my dreams. My body is alive but my soul is dead.'*

Her orchestra friends felt the same way. All three girls shared the same dream: to one day attend the Juilliard School, the performing arts conservatory in New York.

**On 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2021;** Safi and Kabuli received word of a second opportunity to leave Afghanistan. They were informed by their teachers to pack small bags and be ready. Their families had decided that their futures were worth the sacrifice of separation. Kabuli's mother

1 said later that: *'I am happy my daughter is out of the country and out*  
2 *of danger.'*

3  
4 ***[This time some American senators had requested Qatar authorities to***  
5 ***help girls' exit from Kabul.]***  
6

7 After tearful goodbyes, the girls travelled next day to the airport in buses  
8 with 91 other students and faculty, including roughly half of the *Zohra*  
9 *Orchestra*. This time, officials from the Qatari embassy were in the  
10 vehicles, and there were no chaotic scenes at the airport. At one point,  
11 the Taliban officers questioned the validity of some of the girls' travel  
12 documents. But the Qataris convinced them to let the group leave.  
13

14 Also aboard the Qatar Airways plane were graduates of the school who  
15 had played at the Carnegie Hall and Kennedy Centre in the past and  
16 master musicians with deep knowledge of traditional Afghan music.  
17 Their teacher Sarmast said:

18  
19 *"We should rescue this knowledge for the future which is significantly*  
20 *important for the preservation of the musical heritage of Afghanistan*  
21 *and passing it to the new generations."*  
22

23 Named ***ZOHRA after the Persian goddess of music***, the orchestra was  
24 mainly made up of girls and women from a Kabul orphanage aged  
25 between 13 and 20. [Reuters]  
26

27 Then in Doha, the group got prepared to leave for Portugal, which had  
28 granted visas and facilities to restart their musical studies and lives.  
29 About 180 of the school's students, faculty, staff and family members  
30 remained in Kabul, including the rest of the orchestra. Some of the  
31 student girls were not opting to go back to their village as their  
32 neighbours were the Taliban. Everyone there knew them as musicians.  
33

34 In later days, the Taliban officials announced they would issue 25,000  
35 passports, but with hundreds of thousands of Afghans seeking to leave,  
36 Sarmast had little hope his remaining students would receive theirs  
37 quickly. Shogofa told in a tele-interview from Doha that:  
38

39 *"I feel good, but I also feel sad. It's tragic to leave our own country.*  
40 *Now we can chase and continue our dreams. But we think constantly*  
41 *of those left behind. We hope they will soon join us. **Wherever we are,***  
42 ***we will be ZOHRA,** and we will again stand as one community."*  
43