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Breakdancing in Afghanistan: Cultural Resilience Three Years After U.S. Withdrawal [1]

As we mark the third anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Afghan people have demonstrated an extraordinary cultural resilience that defies the long-held stereotype of their country as solely war-torn. Against all odds, Afghans—many exiled outside their country—have not only preserved cultural traditions and the advances made from 2001 to 2021, but also have innovated, breaking stereotypes and barriers.

Take, for instance, the Paris Olympics, where we saw incredible courage and resilience from

Afghan athletes on the Refugee team, and on the Afghan team, three men and three women invited by the International Olympic Committee to participate under the traditional tricolor Afghan flag, not the black and white one of the Taliban. Athletes such as Refugee team break dancer Manizha Talash, or “b-girl Talash," and the cyclist Hashimi sisters, the first Afghans ever to participate in this sport, earned attention and respect from the public and the media. After the Taliban takeover, Talash fled to Madrid with other members of Kabul’s breakdancing community. The only female in the group, Talash stayed true to breaking’s rebellious roots when she donned a cape declaring “Free Afghan Women” at the end of her Olympic routine, resulting in her disqualification.

Hip hop and breakdancing in Afghanistan? Perhaps nothing illustrates so dramatically the chasm between stereotypes of violence and corruption and the truth of the Afghan people’s diversity and fight for individual freedom. As Afghan rapper Jawad Sezdah told a *Washington Post* reporter, “If you ask foreigners about Afghanistan, the only thing that they imagine is like war, guns, old buildings….“Afghanistan is Manizha doing breaking. Afghanistan is me doing rapping. … Afghanistan’s not only war.

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Culture provides a window into the thoughts and lives of ordinary people—their hopes and fears, and their vision of the future. In Afghanistan, what media, sports, music and other forms of creative expression tell us contrasts dramatically with the Taliban’s extremist, restricted ideology and rule.

In March 2019 these two opposite versions of Afghanistan took center stage. Representatives of the Taliban—a terrorist group with no governing power— began negotiations with the Trump administration about the withdrawal of American forces, excluding the Afghan government. At the same time, millions of Afghans were voting for a very different kind of future when they cast their ballots in the wildly popular *Afghan Star* singing contest for Zahra Elham. This eighteen-year-old Afghan woman from the minority Hazara group became the first female winner in the fourteen year history of the groundbreaking TV show, Afghanistan’s version of American Idol.

A new podcast, *Afghan Star,* hosted by John Legend—EGOT-winning music star, activist, coach on *The Voice*—follows the improbable success story of the musical competition that transcended Afghanistan’s tribal and ethnic differences, revived Afghan music after it had been banned by the first Taliban regime, and gave war weary Afghans an escape into the relatively democratic and meritocratic world of a crowd-voting talent show.

Throughout its fifteen year history, from 2005-2020, *Afghan Star* was a bellwether of socio-political change. “Billions of dollars were spent to have elections in Afghanistan, but we [*Afghan Star*] taught Afghans how to be part of a democratic process,” says Daoud Siddiqui,

the first host and producer of the show, in the third podcast episode. Afghan fans launched grassroots campaigns for their favorite contestants, basing their choice on the performance more than ethnic or regional affiliation. Siddiqui and his assistant producer Habib Amiri marvel that traditional animosities melted away as Hazaras supported Pashto singers and vice versa. The show's fans started to "look at Afghanistan as a whole and not as different parts" (says Amiri in episode six). Finalists also modeled good sportsmanship, showing Afghans how to accept defeat gracefully, something Afghan presidential candidates regularly failed to do. (In the first *Afghan Star* season, supporters of the runner up reacted violently, but this did not happen again.)

The positive attitudes towards *Afghan Star* voting over fifteen seasons contrast with the gradual disillusionment with the electoral process in Afghanistan. In 2004 over eight million votes were cast in the first post-Taliban presidential election—an 84% participation level—but by 2019, a combination of fear from Taliban violence (a factor in every election) plus disgust with electoral fraud and government corruption led to a much lower turnout of less than two million votes in the presidential election.

Afghans may have lost faith in their government and in the official election process, but the dedicated following of *Afghan Star* by its fans, and the ways that the contestants, judges, and producers courageously pushed the envelope, demonstrates that many in the country still believed in the values of democracy, equal opportunity, government accountability, and freedom of expression.

Afghan Star was just one example of many progressive developments in the spheres of culture, education, and media, including an award-winning Afghan Girls Robotics Team, the renown all female ensemble Zohra of the Afghan National Institute of Music (ANIM), and world-class male and female sports teams. This summer, the Afghan National Institute of Music youth orchestra, now in exile in Portugal, performed at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center, a reprise of its 2013 tour to those prestigious venues. In 2013 the goal was to thank the American people and the US government for their support and to show them some of the fruits of that support. In 2024, at the Kennedy Center, the founder of ANIM, Dr. Ahmad Sarmast, declared somberly that while today Afghanistan is the only silent nation in the world, "Afghanistan will sing again very loudly."

Before the Taliban takeover in 2021, Afghanistan boasted the most robust independent media sector in the Middle East and central/southeast Asian region, with more than three hundred TV and radio outlets. These outlets regularly held government leaders accountable—both Afghan and foreign—and critically examined challenges in Afghan society through dramas and comedies.

The Afghans who spearheaded these developments and the successors they inspired have not given up, even though most have been forced to flee the country. As the Taliban silences music and erases women from public life, Afghans around the world refuse to accept this dark version of their country. They work to rebuild their lives and redefine their country's future, rooted in a deep sense of identity and connection to Afghanistan's rich culture.