



FREE AT LAST: Kabul's Independence Day festivities heralded a cultural rebirth for the city

KABUL AFGHANISTAN

A Post-Taliban Paris

RECENTLY, DOZENS OF AK-47-TOTING soldiers gathered in a semicircle at Kabul's football stadium. One year ago this might have signaled a much more sinister event. The Taliban frequently gathered crowds here to watch prisoners have their hands and feet amputated—a punishment they justified under Sharia (Islamic law). But this night's entertainment was different. A rectangular stage, swathed in red carpet, had been set up in front of the stands, and a seven-piece Afghan band soon broke into song led by the infectious beat of tabla drums. On the football pitch, groups of soldiers spun around each other like giddy schoolchildren and kicked up clouds of dust. "People in Afghanistan need music as much as they need water to drink," says Mohammed Rafiq Khoshnood, 41, head of the music department at the Ministry of Culture and one of the organizers of last week's Independence Day festivities.

Kabul is coming back to life. Since March nearly 1.5 million members of the Afghan diaspora, many of whom kept their artistic traditions alive while living outside the country, have returned, bringing the cultural influences of their places of refuge—Pakistan, Iran, Europe and the United States.

The massive influx has sparked a dynamic exchange of ideas—don't laugh—not unlike that seen in the Paris of the 1920s. Every day film directors, painters and novelists meet at the Artists Association of Afghanistan to drink tea and debate with their colleagues, some of whom haven't seen each other in years. Association president Timor Shah Hakimyar says his membership is at 3,000 and growing rapidly.

Film companies, theater troupes and art galleries are springing up across the

capital. "When one artist has an exhibition, 10 others are encouraged to do the same," says Mohammad Asefi, a landscape painter whose work was recently on display at the upscale Inter-Continental hotel. When David Mason, a Danish-Iranian dancer recently held auditions for his new theater group, Takamol, nearly 200 people showed up.

As for film, directors are struggling to find their own voice amid the influences of Hollywood and Bollywood. More than a half-dozen private studios have sprung up in the past nine months. Recent offerings tackle social issues such as drug abuse and the difficulties of returning refugees. Other new films are pure distraction. "Dain," a martial-arts comedy about the misadventures of an artifact smuggler, will soon hit the big screen in Kabul.

One of the most successful artistic ventures since the fall of the Taliban is Zanel-e-Gham, a humor magazine. Started as a photocopied zine in 1997, it was banned and its creators forced into hiding, when Taliban intelligence got hold of a copy two years ago.

With help from a foreign nongovernmental organization, the magazine has started printing again and now distributes 2,000 copies.

"In the past, laughter was controlled by the government," says Osman Akram Sargardan, editor of the publication. "If we make fun of a powerful person now they may get upset, but we don't have to be afraid. We're free again." No one can appreciate that more than the artists of Kabul.



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