

Afghan Star: Eyes not opened wide enough

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American Idol, the immensely popular US television program in which contestants compete for a top prize based on vocal talent and showmanship, has become something of a cultural phenomenon, ever since its premiere in 2002. In the show, as in its British predecessor, *Pop Idol*, contestants are first judged by a panel of performers and record industry types. The public itself, through the use of phone voting, then decides in the later stages of the competition.

The *Idol* format is so successful that it has spawned imitations in various countries, war-torn Afghanistan among them. *Afghan Star* is one of that nation's most popular television programs, with finales watched by up to a third of the population. It is Afghanistan's first televised talent competition. The top prize is \$US5,000 (in a country where per capita income averages about \$300 a year), along with the renown that comes with the title.

The eponymous documentary, *Afghan Star*, directed by British filmmaker Havana Marking and shown at the recent Human Rights Watch International Film Festival in New York, showcases the last four contestants on the program's third season. The finalists, all in their late teens and early 20s, were two young men, Rafi Naabzada and Hameed Sakhizada, and two young women, Lima Sahaar and Setara Hussainzada.

The film tells us, through titles, that Afghanistan has been a conflict zone since 1979. The filmmakers emphasize the reactionary cultural policies of the Taliban, who ruled the country from 1996 to 2001. During their rule, the Taliban banned public dancing, singing and television viewing. All types of music were seen as sacrilegious, and prohibited accordingly.

Setara Hussainzada, one of the finalists, tells the camera that the penalty for disobeying these bans was frequently death. Marking's documentary informs us that since the proscription on viewing television was lifted, there has been an explosion of channels.

The film contains some lively moments. As on the US version of the talent show, the terrible singing of the early contestants is shown. Amusingly, but perhaps more tellingly than the filmmakers intend, in one scene a wealthy man buys 10,000 SIM cards (for cell phones), which effectively translates into 10,000 votes for the competitor of his choosing during the final stages of the competition.

A rather young producer of the show says, "In Afghanistan, if we don't have a war, we have an earthquake." The latter are fewer and further between.

Unfortunately, *Afghan Star*'s treatment of its leading figures, although sometimes touching, leaves much to be desired. When all else is said and done, we don't really get to *know* these people, which makes it harder for us to feel a great deal for them.

Rafi is a charismatic 19-year-old from the north. He wants to sing on *Afghan Star*, for one reason, to provide some much-needed diversion for his distressed countrymen and women. Should he win, he intends to spend some of his prize money on redecorating his bathroom with black tiles that he picks up at a run-down appliances store. That is essentially all we learn about him. What is his occupation? What is his family situation? What does he think about his country's condition? These unanswered questions might be applied to all the finalists.

Hameed is an ethnic Hazara (an often persecuted minority) from the central part of the country, torn between a career in either pop or classical music. One of the television program's commendable features in a country of diverse ethnicities is its policy of cultural openness. In the finale, Hameed sings an appeal for ethnic unity. The film's coverage of this is one of its strong points.

This reviewer felt a certain condescension on the part of the filmmakers toward the show's contestants, the females in particular. Interspersed with Setara's and Lima's general remarks about struggling for a better life out of poverty are comments about gender relations in Afghanistan ("Boys only think of girls' bodies") and religion ("If there was no God, there would be no leaves on the trees"). Without any social context, the comments simply seem banal.

On the set of *Afghan Star*—remarkably austere compared to its ridiculously overdecorated American counterpart—Setara, one of the female candidates, decides to dance while singing her number. Unbeknown to the documentary's audience to that point, a woman dancing publicly represents a direct affront to Sharia law in Afghanistan. Even some of the country's youth deem Setara "loose," with one suggesting she deserves to be executed. Rafi tells the camera that she did not do a good thing, for Afghanistan is an Islamic society: "She will pay a big price."

Indeed, this forms something of a mini-story in the film, as Setara is evicted from her apartment and forced to go live with her parents in her hometown of Herat, amid ongoing threats against her life.

Western imperialism bears a massive responsibility for the continued prevalence of social and ideological backwardness in Afghanistan, in a region that has been part of the various powers' "Great Game" for nearly two centuries. The British in the nineteenth century and US policy makers more recently have formed alliances with and propped up elements of the Islamic elite to further their own interests. Keeping the population in darkness, despite official propaganda to the contrary, serves the aims of the foreign predators.

For decades, Washington financed and fomented Islamicist elements, against either secular left nationalist movements (in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East), or, in the case of the CIA's financing of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, to help destabilize the Soviet Union. In what probably won't come as a surprise, *Afghan Star* is entirely silent about this sordid history.

In any event, Setara proves to be a resilient young woman. Her reasons for dancing on stage are noble ones. She wants to "lift the heaviness from her heart," as well as to show Afghans that there is nothing wrong with a woman dancing on stage. She is used to being afraid, ever since the Taliban times, and now, in a "victorious" Afghanistan, she has no fear. The show's presenter supports her stance, thus establishing a tension between the program and conservative layers in the country. Setara survives the ordeal, but dancing is henceforth excluded from the program.

The two female contestants are voted off, and only Rafi and Hameed remain. They sing and joke together in the car on the way to the show, a charming moment. On the season finale, Rafi sings a song about a potential female lover, and Hameed performs his beautiful hymn on behalf of tolerance and unity. The winner is decided by cell phone.

Afghan Star has its moments, but, after all, this is a documentary about events and people in *Afghanistan*. Astonishingly, nowhere in the film do its creators make a single reference to what has happened politically (and militarily) in the country since the Taliban's removal from power by Northern Alliance and US-led NATO forces in 2001.

The viewer is not informed about the occupation of the country, much less the geopolitical interests that might be motivating the various powers involved. Throughout, Afghanistan is portrayed as a blossoming, culture-starved, peaceful "democracy." We see a brief image of a ragtag group of insurgents threatening a telephone network. The documentary implies that they belong to a small guerilla movement rapidly fading into oblivion. We see a few unidentified tanks and a helicopter at apparently random moments. Whose are they? Why are they there?

In fact, in the recent period, the Afghan insurgency has grown

in strength. The US and other occupying forces have responded in kind, with brutal bombings of civilians on a regular basis.

Afghan Star notes the hometowns of the finalists. Rafi, for instance, comes from Mazar-e-Sharif, a city in the north, while Setara is from Herat, in the west. Nowhere is it even implied that due to the decades of war and great power intrigue these youths come from areas where varying degrees of political anarchy and social misery reign. Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, is frequently referred to as the "mayor of Kabul," because his control only effectively extends to the city limits. Warlords, insurgents and the occupation forces vie for control in the rest of the country.

One can make certain allowances for a work of art. If a fiction film, for example, about the Afghan situation seriously delved into the lives of an individual and his or her family, a neighborhood, a community, the particular might provide insight into the overall situation. Even then, one must say, not even a fleeting allusion to the fact that the protagonists were living under a violent foreign occupation would be noteworthy.

In a nonfiction film about the socio-cultural condition of the country, such an "omission," or series of omissions, is inexcusable. One is tempted to ask whether the film was deliberately constructed to shed as little light as possible on the present role of imperialism in the country. Whether it was or not, by portraying Afghanistan as a stable, growing, "democratic" nation, the work functions too often as a US-NATO propaganda piece.

In New York, director Havana Marking was available after the film showing for questions from the audience. This reviewer had the chance to ask her about her neglect of these broader issues. Why was the war not even given a *passing reference* in her film? For two reasons, she replied: first, from the practical point of view, mentioning NATO's presence would have put the film project in danger; second, *Afghan Star* was intended to be about the impact of war, not the war itself. Neither of these explanations holds much water.

All in all, *Afghan Star* does open one's eyes to some of the conditions—and the humanity—of people in Afghanistan. Certain shots of Kabul and Herat are particularly striking. But in its marked neglect of the political and social context, as well as the haphazard sketches it draws of its characters, the documentary does not open them wide enough.



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