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Soccer stretches Taleban rules



The Taleban has strict rules on clothing and behaviour

By Kate Clark in Kabul

Under Taleban rule, most fun is banned. Music, dancing, cinema, art, television and are all illegal.

Without music, weddings are tedious. Even picnics - the national Afghan pastime - have been reduced to dull, all-male affairs.

When the Taleban first came to Kabul there were rumours they would even stop people playing football. But after a few nervous months, matches started up again.

The league is amateur, thriving and wildly popular. It attracts crowds that most first division teams the UK would die for - but this is one of the few legal ways of having fun.

Last Friday, I was the only woman among 19,999 men who packed out Kabul's stadium.

I bought my ticket - which cost just under four cents (about 2p) - and was ushered in.

Armed guards

The guards were armed with kalashnikovs and lengths of electric cable to be used as whips, but they were polite and helpful - I have felt more threatened by policemen on horseback outside UK football grounds.

They forced the crowd to part and showed me up the stairs into the official stand.

“Thousands of Afghans having fun is such a rare sight”

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The stadium is also where they carry out public executions and amputations.

But thank goodness, on this Friday, the only attraction was seeing Maiwand play the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The crowd was in good spirits. Someone bought me a pot of tea and the play began.



The football was dreadful - but the match itself was a spectacle. Thousands of Afghans having fun is such a rare sight.

The Taliban: Becoming a little more lenient

They clapped - an illegal action here. But more daring resistance was to come.

Half way through the first half, it was time for the late afternoon prayers.

Pick-ups full of police from Vice and Virtue drove into the stadium and circled round. Using loud speakers, they ordered everyone to come onto the pitch and pray.

Show of resistance

A few thousand people straggled onto the grass, but most remained resolutely standing. Policemen leapt into the stands, whips in hand.

But the crowds just melted away before them, only to reform a little further up the stands. After 20 minutes, maybe a third of the crowd had been forced onto the pitch (God help the groundsmen) and prayers were said.

“What might seem like a minor misdemeanour can land you in jail”

It was a show of resistance. That is unheard of in Kabul. People here are generally crushed and compliant - terrified of getting caught by Vice and Virtue.

What might seem like a minor misdemeanour can land you in jail. For men - not wearing a cap, trimming - or God forbid, shaving your beard.

For women, not covering your face or travelling in a taxi unaccompanied by a male relative.

People caught playing music in their cars are usually given the choice of seeing their cassette player smashed or spending some time in prison.

Checkposts trail nests of tape taken from broken cassettes.

Occasionally, by perverse accident, you are let off. One friend had all his cassettes destroyed - apart from one by the American singer, Tracey Chapman. "That's not music," the policeman said.

No appeal process

But usually there is no escape - there is no appeal process - and unlike other organs of the Taleban state, Vice and Virtue have a reputation for incorruptibility - you cannot bribe your way out of their clutches.

I have only been had up by them once - for the crime of sitting in the front seat of a car. My driver - a foreign man - was told off and ordered to make me sit in the back seat.



Cassette tapes are confiscated at checkpoints

As the man, he was seen as responsible for my behaviour. That was in Kandahar - the Taleban's stronghold. Elsewhere in the country, I can drive myself.

But the religious police have calmed down a little. They no longer force people to paint their windows, but allow curtains, so that passers-by cannot see women inside the house.

“
Afghanistan is easily the most devout country I have ever visited
”

They have become a little more lenient as to what women can wear underneath their burqas - the blue gowns which cover the face and body.

Flares were banned, when they first came to the city, along with white socks and high heels. These days, women wear trouser suits and platform shoes, although they still have to keep their faces covered.

And the police no longer check down men's trousers to make sure they have shaved their pubic hair. Yes, it happened on the streets of Kabul.

Vice and Virtue

Vice and Virtue are probably the most feared part of the Taleban state.

They are central to the movement's conception of itself as an Islamic state - enforcing the pure tenets of the religion and faithful to God.

They are also the aspect of the Taleban which foreigners find most alien, going against individual rights, civil liberties and democracy.

It has to be said that many of the sophisticated citizens of Kabul, also find them alien - uneducated villagers enforcing their weird conception of Islam.

The irony is that Afghanistan is easily the most devout country I have ever visited. Most people pray and fast here, quietly and without making a big fuss - but they object to being ordered to.

But even the most liberal states ban activities they consider disruptive and harmful - like taking heroin or walking topless down the high street.



Traditional burqas: Women are no longer as restricted

Like those governments, the Taleban also say they want to protect society. They believe that seeing women's faces or listening to music will inevitably lead to deeper immorality.

Whatever the social and religious motivations of the Vice and Virtue, its most useful function is probably the demonstration of raw Taleban power.

But on Friday afternoons in Kabul's stadium, that power seems to ebb away a little.

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