**Lions of the Future:**
How a Singing Competition is Transforming Afghanistan

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*This paper addresses how the television singing competition* Afghan Star *has contributed to the broader discussion of national identity in Afghanistan. Considering decades of war, an ineffectual government, and conservative opposition, the ability for a television programme to influence its audience has become even more significant. This article examines the motivations that underscore* Afghan Star*'s production and asks how the programme acts as a democratic forum to discuss issues of national identity. Additionally, the paper explores – via lyrical analysis – the way female participants and rappers engage with that discourse. Through addressing its audience's crucial concerns such as gender rights, economic disparity, and government corruption,* Afghan Star *establishes itself as a major player in defining what it means to be both modern and Afghan.*

> "This is a proud nation of Lions and Lionesses; as One Nation and One Voice we are all Afghans."[1] - Sayed Jamal Mubarez

In 2005, Tolo TV launched Afghanistan's first singing talent competition: *Afghan Star*. The groundbreaking show – which transcends the ethnic, gender, and age divisions that have too often blighted Afghanistan's social history – sought to showcase Afghanistan's singing talents and unite the nation through a love of traditional music. In the final rounds, viewers participate in equitable voting – a system that contrasts with the insecurity of regular political elections. The programme entered its fourteenth season in 2018, making it the longest running series on Afghan television.

How has *Afghan Star* dominated Afghanistan television in the face of two decades of war and violent opposition? Considering Afghanistan's evermore uncertain future, will there continue to be a place for such reality television series? Katherine Sender argues that one must examine reality television shows such as *Afghan Star* as a product of necessary compromises among professional, economic, and gender constraints.[2] This means examining the labyrinth behind *Afghan Star* and its network, Tolo. Saad Mohseni, an Australian-Afghan banker, founded Tolo under its parent organisation Moby Media Group in 2003 to facilitate news and entertainment enterprises in South and Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Through a political, social and economic analysis of Saad Mohseni and Moby Group, and a lyrical analysis of performances in *Afghan Star* Season Twelve (2017-2018) this paper hopes to shed light on *Afghan Star*'s position as a democratic forum through which Afghans can discuss issues related to national

[1] Aryana Sayeed and Sayed Jamal Mubarez, "Jamal Mubarez NEW SONG – Sacred Obligation" (Sherzaad Entertainment, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcF9g9Ufu1k>.
[2] Katherine Sender, "Introduction: Migration Genres, Travelling Participants, Shifting Theories," in Marwan M. Kraidy and Katherine Sender, eds., *The Politics of Reality Television: Global Perspectives* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 5.

identity. The paper will address the following questions: Who is Tolo TV and what are its motivations in producing *Afghan Star*? To what extent does *Afghan Star* facilitate a discussion of Afghan national identity and unity? And how do the show's participants engage in this discourse? Overall, although commercial interests inherently underscore *Afghan Star*, its semi-democratic processes and convincing characters facilitate a new public to discuss Afghan national identity.

A crucial element of this study involved watching *Afghan Star* and transcribing the raps of Season Twelve winner Sayed Jamal Mubarez. The lyrics to Mubarez's raps were not available in online or print sources. Thus, I conducted translations in conjunction with doctoral student Munazza Ebtikar of the Department of Oriental Studies (Anthropology) at the University of Oxford through listening and transcription. Ebtikar assisted to identify translation inconsistencies and in distinguishing colloquialisms, idioms, and the Hazaragi dialect which were essential to produce as accurate translations as possible. All transliterations follow the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* transliteration guide unless the source provided a transliteration.

Additionally, this paper will use the term "Dari" instead of "Persian/Farsi" when referring to the lingua franca of Afghanistan because it is recognised as such in Afghanistan's constitution. There is debate about how dominant ethnic groups may utilise the term Dari as a way to distance the Afghan people from cultural and historical ties to the Persian-speaking world, namely Iran and Tajikistan. However, this paper will use Dari to refer to the language spoken in Afghanistan and Farsi when referring to those who speak the Persian/Farsi language at large. The way in which certain groups utilise language as a means to establish an Afghan identity will be explored later the paper.

This paper will begin with a historical overview of how media has been used since the late nineteenth century to create a cohesive Afghan national identity and the challenges media faces in convincing ethnic groups, minorities, and politicians to endorse said unity. Then, the paper will discuss Tolo's motivations for producing *Afghan Star*, focusing on how it uses national unity as a pathway to enter into democratic discussion about what it means to be Afghan in the twenty-first century. Finally, the paper will examine how participants in *Afghan Star* Season Twelve become immersed as characters in Tolo's democratic forum, namely how it normalises women's participation in this discussion. Throughout the programme participants represent the ideal for Tolo's vision of a future Afghanistan, but how to achieve a true sense of national unity.

**Media in Afghanistan: A Historical Overview**

Afghanistan's varied geography reflects its diverse demography. The Hindu Kush Mountains run from the northeast corner of the country to the southwest, dividing the country into northern plains and a southern wasteland known as the Sistan Basin, one of the driest regions in the world. It has been home to Greeks, Mauryas, Mongols, and Persians, and more recently the British, Soviet Union, and United States. Largely an agrarian society, more than fifty ethnic groups who speak over forty languages comprise

Afghanistan.[3] The largest ethnic groups are Pashtuns (forty-two percent), Tajiks (twenty-seven percent), and Hazara and Uzbek (nine percent each).[4] Weaving the many ethnic threats into a single overarching carpet of "Afghanness" is one of the largest challenges Afghanistan faces.

Afghanistan's leaders have struggled to consolidate these groups since the nation's political inception in 1747. In fact, the term "Afghan" traditionally refers to one of five Pashtun tribes living around the valley of Peshawar resulting in Afghanistan's literal translation to mean "land of the Pashtuns." This terminology is problematic for minority ethnic groups as it prioritises the Pashtun people and imposes a national identity based on this single tradition on other groups. Mohammad Rawan argues that the disjointed development of media since the late nineteenth century in Afghanistan shows the lack of a uniform identity that ultimately hinders the development of Afghan society.[5] As leaders attempted to redefine "Afghan" to include all those who reside within the Afghan state as a mode to push Afghanistan into the modern era, more tensions arose between ethnic groups vying for power. The historical context of what it means to be "Afghan" creates difficulties between different ethnic groups, especially Tajiks and Hazaras – among others – who feel that Pashtuns discriminate against them. This is one of many tensions that make forming an Afghan national identity difficult; it is a narrative the media has intertwined itself with since Afghanistan's first newspaper.

As early as the end of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan's media sector was already developing. One of the first major newspapers in circulation, Mahmud Tarzi's Seraj-al-Akhbar, advocated for total independence from the British and provided the first justification for the modernisation of Afghanistan. Seraj-al-Akhbar attempted to link modernisation, patriotism, and Islam together as indivisible and intrinsic elements of Afghan society; it promoted national unity and solidarity in light of a politically stagnant and isolated state.[6] One of the main goals of the paper was to educate Afghans through transforming the traditional and outdated system. Tarzi attempted to spread the idea of a national consciousness intended to unite Afghanistan's people. Only through unity would Afghanistan be capable of overcoming its political isolation. In 1953, Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan took politicised media further by actively using journalism to reflect his policies. Under Daoud's administration various ministries, state institutions, and educational agencies disseminated thirty-one new journals.[7] While Afghan media maintained – and continues to maintain – its role in educating the population, those in power slowly began to exploit it for the sole purpose of keeping that power."[8]

[3] Nigel Allan, "Defining Place and People in Afghanistan," *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics* 42, no. 8 (December 1, 2001): 545.

[4] Timothy Olson, "'Only the Name Is New': Identity, Modernity, and Continuity in '*Afghan Star*'" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017): 16, http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1453&context=masters>.

[5] Shir Mohammed Rawan, "Modern Mass Media and Traditional Communication in Afghanistan," Taylor and Francis Group (2002), 158.

[6] Rawan, "Modern Mass Media," 157.

[7] Rawan, "Modern Mass Media," 159.

[8] Rawan, "Modern Mass Media," 155.

As radio became more widespread, the government redefined its official purposes fourfold: spreading the message of the Quran, contributing to public education, perpetuating the treasures of Afghan folklore, and reflecting the national spirit.[9] However, musicians – not politicians – benefited the most from media usage in Afghanistan's larger cities. Ustads (musical masters), with the addition of radio and later cassette tapes, helped popular music develop and spread. They brought together Dari texts, Pashtun musical style, and Hindustani theory and terminology, creating music unique to Afghanistan that transcended culturally distinct communities.[10] Music provided entertainment, but also an avenue through which Afghans could begin to perceive nationhood, or at least what it meant to be an Afghan in the broadest sense of the word.

However, it is arguable when Afghanistan first achieved "nationhood." According to Benedict Anderson, a nation is "an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." [11] Therefore, from to a lack of an "imagined political community" in Afghanistan due to a limited intellectual class, ethnic diversity, and colonial suppression, Afghanistan struggled to define its nationhood at least until Prime Minister Daoud. Raghav Sharma argues that as the nationalising state began to define ethnic differences, it also denied the idea of nationhood to minorities which protracted social conflict and making the country vulnerable to external invasion – alongside weak political leaders and limited government reach.[12] Arguably, the strongest sense of Afghan nationhood existed in the war against the Soviets (1979-1989), when multiple ethnic groups aligned against the common threat of foreign invasion. Unfortunately, this unity deteriorated in the years following victory over the Soviets. As one group came to power and attempted to monopolise the state they denied rights to other groups. The Afghan Civil War (1989-1996) cemented tribal politics, factionalism, and weakness of state institutions in Afghan society. The current Afghan government remains unable to overcome these tribal politics and factionalism. These institutionalised divisions are one of the largest hurdles facing those today who advocate for a united Afghanistan.

Nation-building is contingent on the extent to which the state is successful in an ideological and culturally homogenising project – in other words, the state's ability to inspire nationalism. The complex relationship between the state, external actors, and national minorities exacerbated differences and made it difficult to form a cohesive Afghan nation. However, despite the challenges that Afghanistan faces to build a nation as defined by Anderson, Afghans do cultivate a strong sense of national pride – national unity encompasses a mosaic of groups, ethnicities, and languages – that identify as "Afghan" under a single umbrella. If nationalism consists of demarcating territory and the standardisation of everything within it, then national unity seeks to embrace diversity within those lines instead of rejecting those who do not meet the standard. Private commercial networks and state-run media have had the wherewithal to produce and

[9] John Baily, "The Role of Music in the Creation of an Afghan National Identity, 1923-73," in Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1994), 46.
[10] Baily, "The Role of Music," 51.
[11] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London, UK: Verso, 2006), 6.
[12] Raghav Sharma, *Nation, Ethnicity and the Conflict in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016), 47.

implement their own versions of what it means to be part of the nation that is Afghanistan. Not so different than the media before it, Tolo TV attempts to define a cohesive Afghan identity through programmes such as *Afghan Star*. Although Afghanistan's diversity has contributed to a history of embedded tribalism and factionalism, media has also been a tool through which groups promote and justify their power. Since Afghanistan's political inception intellectuals and politicians have struggled to define what it means to be "Afghan." This notion of nationhood has undergone iterations that include and exclude ethnic groups, and which remains debated today. The paper will now examine how Tolo TV participates in this discourse; although Tolo does tap into this pre-existing notion of nationhood to promote its programmes such as *Afghan Star*, throughout this process it also establishes a public domain that normalises discussion of Afghanistan's nationhood.

**Tolo TV and Afghanistan's first media tycoon**

*Afghan Star* was conceptualised on the television network Tolo, meaning "dawn" in Dari. Moby Media Group, Tolo's parent organisation, seeks to launch and build media businesses in high-growth and emerging markets, such as Afghanistan.[13] After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 Saad Mohseni and his siblings Zaid, Jahid, and Wajma Mohseni returned to Afghanistan after growing up in Melbourne, Australia for most of their lives. Saad had made a career in banking, commodities and equity capital markets, and established Moby Media Group shortly after his return. The company obtained a broadcast license in 2002, which allowed the Mohsenis to establish the radio station Arman FM.[14] Mohseni is now the chairman and chief executive of Moby Group, a private media company that owns Tolo TV, Tolonews, Lemar TV, and additional channels across Central and Southeast Asia. Moby Group also acts as an advertising and consulting agency and owns several restaurants.

Moby Group faced many challenges since Arman FM's inception. Although radio and television networks were established in 1928, decades of war left this infrastructure in shambles.[15] In order to help restore basic radio infrastructure the Mohseni family invested $300,000 USD and received a $280,000 USD grant from USAID. This grant was part of USAID's initiative to support independent media as a means to unite Afghanistan, and is a fraction of the $166 million USAID and the US State Department have used to support Afghan media development.[16] In 2003, Moby Group launched Arman FM, which began broadcasting twelve hours a day. One of the first radio hosts Mohseni hired was Massoud Sanjer, now *Afghan Star*'s producer. Sanjer had hosted Radio Shari'a under the Taliban and was a well-known presenter across the nation. After Arman FM's launch,

[13] "Welcome to MOBY Group | MOBY Group," accessed 5 April 2018, http://www.mobygroup.com/>.

[14] Graham Bowley, "An Afghan Media Mogul, Pushing Boundaries," *New York Times*, 27 July 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/business/an-afghan-media-mogul-pushing-boundaries.html>.

[15] In 1928, Afghanistan had its first successful radio broadcast. By 1940, they could broadcast Radio Kabul all over Afghanistan, and by 1966 programming times increased from six hours to sixteen hours. By 1990, Radio Afghanistan was the only state-owned station in the country, broadcasting more than fifty programming hours and reaching five million listeners. Rawan, "Modern Mass Media," 161.

[16] Ken Auletta, "Afghanistan's First Media Mogul," *New Yorker*, 28 June 2010, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/07/05/the-networker-2.

it was natural for Moby Group to shift attentions to television proliferation. The group invested nearly three and a half million US dollars, in addition to a two million dollar USAID grant to create the most popular channel in Afghanistan – Tolo.

Due to improved infrastructure and media projects, Tolo is available to seventy-five percent (six million) of Afghans with a television, and attracts 49.8 percent of television viewership.[17] Comparatively, the national service Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) attracts only 2.9 percent of viewers. The next closest television competitor is Khurshid, who captures 8.5 percent of the audience share and is known for its entertainment programmes and soap operas.[18] The BBC identifies at least five major types of media in Afghanistan: mainstream commercial media; externally funded local FM radio; ethnic, religious, and political media; Taliban media; and government controlled media.[19] Tolo is a commercial media outlet with an expansive reach beyond the government controlled RTA network. These various TV channels compete for a slice of Afghanistan's audience in an attempt to promulgate their own message and views. With the largest stake in Afghanistan's television audience and as the most successful network, Tolo has the resources and opportunity to be a major player in transforming society. What, then, does Tolo have to gain from its network dominance?

Although Tolo also runs a news network Tolo News, its most popular programmes are Tolo TV's entertainment shows. Over its fourteen seasons since 2003, *Afghan Star* has become more professional, aesthetically pleasing, and competitive. Similar to Al-Jazeera's influential coverage of the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world, Tolo has used reality television programmes like *Afghan Star* to leverage its ascendancy as Afghanistan's most influential media. The programme is open to Afghans of all ages and ethnicities, and it brings Afghanistan's diversity onto a single stage. All parties can sit at the table to engage in democratic discussion about topics to include, but not limited to, Afghan national identity.

In his essay Reality TV and Multiple Arab Identities (2010), Marwan Kraidy illustrates how reality television in the Middle East does indeed stir contention in public life. He argues that reality TV provides an alternative interpretation of modernity to that which traditional approaches suggest. In his discussion of the Lebanese series Superstar, similar in format to *Afghan Star*, Kraidy argues that the show brings simmering social and political tensions to the surface, forcing participants and audiences to ask "How can [one] be Arab and modern at the same time without one of these identities usurping the other?"[20] Media, politicians, and civil society each attempt to answer this question by defining their own visions of what it means to be "Arab and modern." Kraidy argues that reality television serves as a "hybrid-text" in the sense that it mixes the traditional

[17] Holly Robinson, et al., "Afghan Media in 2014: Understanding the Audience" (Altai Consulting, February 2015): 7, http://www.altaiconsulting.com/insights/afghan-media/>.

[18] Robinson, et al., "Afghan Media in 2014."

[19] David Page and Shirazuddin Siddiqi, "BBC – Policy Briefing: The Media of Afghanistan – The Challenges of Transition – Media Action" BBC (2012): 6, http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/policy/briefings/asia/afghanistan/policy-afghanistan>.

[20] Marwan Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life, Communication, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 193.

and the modern.[21] Kraidy does not reduce television to a debate between this binary, but argues that television is a platform to address issues along every part of the spectrum. Each television network attempts and competes to legitimise their modernity; and they accomplish this by appealing to some groups over others, which amplifies the resonance of some political agendas while blunting others.[22] In Afghanistan, this competition is evident in Tolo's success at the detriment of the national network. RTA has consistently used religion to legitimise itself and mobilise the population, whereas Tolo, and other private networks, appeal to social issues and national identity. David Page and Shirazuddin Sidiqi criticise RTA for its poor coordination, short-term goals, and heavy focus on advancing the agendas of its donors – distorting the media market and creating dependency on donor support.[23]

Central to Tolo's programming is its focus on national unity, an ideal permeating the vision of modernity it competes to establish in Afghanistan. Whether through challenging the government, promoting women's involvement in society, or supporting the Afghan national army, Tolo seeks to breakdown ethnic divisions and transcend traditional-modern boundaries in favour of an Afghanistan where people identify as "Afghan" first and their ethnic group second. Saad Mohseni says that the Afghan people, not international geopolitical actors – namely the United States – shoulder the responsibility to enact this unity and define Afghanistan's future.[24] National unity is thus the bedrock of Tolo's foundation.

In the context of Kraidy's argument, Tolo instrumentalises "national unity" as a means to encourage social change. Mohseni claimed that he chose to invest in Afghanistan's media sector because "you can really influence people, particularly younger people."[25] His colleagues asserted that he played a crucial role in forging the identity of a generation of young Afghans who stand as a bulwark against the country's collapse.[26] Tolo's social influence is evident not only in its popularity, but in the fierce criticism it receives. The former Minister of Information and Culture – Abdul Karim Khurram- accused Mohseni of broadcasting programmes that disgraced Afghan culture, citing depictions of women with multiple partners and dressed in revealing clothing. He claimed that Tolo is "serving America's interests."[27] In October 2017, religious clerics and their followers protested against *Afghan Star* when it came to Herat for auditions. They carried banners which lambasted the show as "satanic" while asserting it had no place in Herat's ancient history and traditions.[28]

[21] Marwan Kraidy, "Reality TV and Multiple Arab Modernities: A Theoretical Exploration," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 1, no. 1 (2008): 51, https://doi.org/10.1163/187398608X317414>.

[22] Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics*, 199.

[23] Page and Siddiqi, "BBC – Policy Briefing: The Media of Afghanistan," 3.

[24] John Dempsey and Saad Mohseni, "The Afghan Surge Trump Needs," *Politico*, 17 May 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/05/17/afghan-surge-trump-215146>.

[25] Auletta, "Afghanistan's First Media Mogul."

[26] Bowley, "An Afghan Media Mogul, Pushing Boundaries."

[27] Auletta, "Afghanistan's First Media Mogul."

[28] Sahrab Serat, "موسیقی تهدید است یا انفجار؟؛ واکنش‌ها به اعتراض روحانیان هرات به 'ستاره افغان'" [Is Music a Threat or Explosion? Reactions to the Protest of Clerics of Herat against '*Afghan Star*']," BBC Persian, 22 October 2017, http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-41713348.>

Ironically, these demonstrations utilised their freedom of expression to criticise musicians on *Afghan Star* for freely expressing themselves. *Afghan Star* has spurred vocal opposition into action, suggesting that a societal transformation threatening these clerics' authority is occurring. In fact, many Afghans criticised the march. Facebook and Twitter users questioned why the protesters marched against music and singing which make people happy, but not against continued terrorist attacks carried out by religious extremists. One user wrote, "Extreme mullahs in Herat are not minding the killing of people in the name of religion, they are trying to prevent the holding of the celebration of *Afghan Star* in Herat. Islam is in danger."[29] This heated debate underscores the importance of *Afghan Star* for Afghan society: the programme generates a democratic forum where Afghans debate what it means to be living in modern Afghanistan. Various forms of social media, in conjunction with *Afghan Star*, ignite this discussion and advance the programme's ability to empower Afghans to take part in this developing discourse.

Tolo's financial background and political affiliations add another layer through which to consider the authenticity of the modernity it promotes. Presently, Moby Group's revenue is estimated at over sixty-million US dollars per year and is projected to increase fifty to seventy percent in the subsequent years, allowing it to fund networks such as Tolo and embark on other projects across the region.[30] Although Tolo is not the main producer of Moby's revenue, it does contribute through local advertisers who pay about five hundred US dollars for a thirty second advertisement slot. In a country where the average annual national income per capita is four-hundred and ten US dollars, those who can afford the power to advertise wield considerable power. The Mohseni family has invested over ten million US dollars, with an addition of $2.2 million USD from USAID. This assistance to Tolo suggests that the network must answer in some respect to its foreign donors. Just as the image of the blue burqa – central to justifying international presence in Afghanistan – did not go unnoticed by Afghans,[31] Afghans are hyper aware of international funding and motivations that drive Tolo's agenda.

Havana Marking's documentary *Afghan Star* depicts how women challenge social norms by singing on stage, but also struggle to find a culturally legitimate voice. [32] While western advocates for women's rights may praise Tolo as the saviour of female singers in Afghanistan, the status of Afghan women is more closely linked to the historical state of war Afghanistan has experienced for decades. Tolo is an indigenous network, not a foreign import. Thus, Tolo is more a continuation of historical Afghan media practices – educating the population, and then promoting a particular modernity to it – in the way it encourages Afghans to ask difficult questions about Afghan national identity, rather than an international pawn.

Since 2003, Tolo has become self-sustainable – one of the few commercial networks in the country to be considered as such. While Western influence is no doubt present,

[29] Serat, "Is Music a Threat or Explosion?"

[30] Auletta, "Afghanistan's First Media Mogul."

[31] Lina S. Khodor, "Liberation at Gunpoint: Deconstructing Politicized Representations of Afghan Women," (n.d.): 46.

[32] Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan, Ethnography of Political Violence* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

Tolo is more subject to its audience's satisfaction and the success of its programmes to generate profit. Programmes like *Afghan Star* – that adopt a political posture – suggest that Tolo engages in what Zala Volcic calls "commercial nationalism," or the promotion of nationalism to attract viewers, improve popularity, and obtain more advertising contracts in order to increase its yearly revenue.[33] Tolo's relative financial stability gives it "a license" to make bold political statements, even within Afghanistan's tense and chaotic political climate.

However, one cannot reduce reality television to a binary between the traditional and modern. The discussion must also include the social and political environment in which the programme and its network operate. While Afghans consider Tolo a strong modern outlet that provides trustworthy news, alongside platforms for open discussion, the network has also invited political criticism.[34] These criticisms commonly centre around the portrayal of ethnic tensions between the historically political dominant Pashtuns and the less prominent Tajiks, the latter of which the Mohsenis are thought to identify with. Powerful politicians and warlords manipulate ethnic tensions and accuse Tolo of biased reporting. Former Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabet had Tolo's offices raided and staff members arrested while then-incumbent president Hamid Karzai refused to appear on Tolo's presidential debate in 2014.[35] Saad Mohseni himself, who says he no longer believes government can be an effective tool for change, is often the reason for his network's strained relationship with the government. At times this tension incites Mohseni to deliberately attack old ethnic alliances that dominate Afghanistan's political sphere, or challenge the conservative ruling elite. Mohseni argues, "If [a] show brings a smile to millions of Afghan faces on a nightly basis, what right does the government have to take away those moments of joy from people?"[36]

In *Afghan Star* Season Twelve Episode Twenty-Eight, judge Aryana Sayeed and participant Sayed Jamal Mubarez performed a duet and broke into a side-stepping dance. However, the producers cut the performance in the broadcast that evening. Instead, they posted the full episode on YouTube, which now has over five million views. First, considering the ongoing threats Tolo and its employees face politically and from terrorist attacks – most recently two Tolo journalists were killed in a targeted suicide attack September 2018[37] – this episode is one example of Tolo's perseverance, providing the network with the credibility necessary to compete in Afghanistan's tense political atmosphere.

Second, it highlights the media's need to self-censor in order to become a legitimate player for the audience's attention. Afghanistan's Media Law of 2009 promotes a "free independent and pluralistic mass media" and "protection of rights of journalists," which in theory should prevent such self-censorship. However, the law caveats that this freedom is relevant only when broadcasts do not include content that is defamatory or

[33] Zala Volcic and Mark Andrejevic, "Commercial Nationalism on Balkan Reality Television," *The Politics of Reality Television,* Marwan M. Kraidy and Katherine Sender, eds. (London: New York: Routledge, 2011), 115.
[34] Robinson, et al., "Afghan Media in 2014," 8.
[35] Auletta, "Afghanistan's First Media Mogul."
[36] Auletta, "Afghanistan's First Media Mogul."
[37] Tamim Hamid, "TOLOnews Loses Two Of Its Journalists," TOLOnews, 5 September 2018, /afghanistan/tolonews-loses-two-its-journalists>.

contrary to Islam.[38]

However, some Afghans and international journalists dismiss Tolo as "pure entertainment," rather than a political, democratic experiment. They point to Tolo's blending of local and western wardrobes into chic outfits, the integration of Afghan and Western instrumentation, and the ability to vote via text to discredit Tolo's status.[39] Ultimately, these critics argue that Tolo's entertainment value is not worth the conflict with extremists who characterise music as vulgar and oppress women's rights.[40] However, this overlooks the way entertainment provides an escape from continuous fighting and hardship – an escape that also opens space for public discussion. If its ultimate motivation is to establish national unity, it does so through an appeal to the pathos. Mohseni affirms: "We enable people to escape. They go somewhere else. Their lives become less, I don't know – people underestimate the importance of entertainment."[41] Media provides new hope and images; it permits respite from intractable problems and allows people to escape their misery.[42] Whether that be through pure entertainment or through open discussion, Tolo and *Afghan Star* delegate the ability to define Afghan national unity to the Afghan people themselves.

The context in which Afghans formulate and debate national identity and unity is shaped by the social, economic, and political realities in which Afghans live – its poverty and inequalities, job scarcity and international aid dependency, and ineffective government. This section has attempted to show how *Afghan Star* navigates this complex environment in conjunction with its network's social, political, and economic motivations. As it competes to secure its own interpretation of Afghan modernity, it must continually reevaluate its position in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, Tolo remains Afghanistan's main media outlet that includes indigenous, social, and economic issues by compiling them into a single united Afghan identity.

**Afghanistan: A Nation United?**

*Afghan Star* is not the first instance in which music has been used in Afghanistan to support a nationalist movement. John Baily explores how music was central to the creation of an Afghan national identity, asserting that although the Afghan government wanted to establish a national identity, they had no idea how to achieve it. Instead, radio and music made national identity possible under monarchical rule (1929-1973) even if not state-directed.[43] The fall of the Taliban marked the end of a period of musical depression and the regeneration of musical development and expression. Moby Group acts as one of many media patrons in this revival.

*Afghan Star*'s website states, "the show exceeds all ethnical [sic], language and

[38] Page and Siddiqi, "BBC - Policy Briefing: The Media of Afghanistan," 23.
[39] Mujib Mashal, "A Rapping Barber, a Defiant Teenager and a Release for War-Weary Afghans," *New York Times*, 6 March 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/world/asia/afghan-star-kabul-afghanistan.html>.
[40] Mashal, "A Rapping Barber."
[41] Bowley, "An Afghan Media Mogul, Pushing Boundaries."
[42] Auletta, "Afghanistan's First Media Mogul."
[43] Baily, "The Role of Music," 56.

gender barriers, and has been a catalyst for social and cultural change in Afghanistan since its inception. *Afghan Star* brings together the entire nation through music!" Massoud Sanjer believes that *Afghan Star* has broken down ethnic and gender divisions in Afghanistan. He views the way male and female participants share the stage and the ethnic variety of past winners as evidence of national unity.[44] Daoud Sediqi, former director and presenter of *Afghan Star*, said that the show allowed him to create a better culture and "move people from the gun to the music."[45] In his study of *Afghan Star*, Timothy Olson recorded participants' reactions to *Afghan Star*. Participants affirmed that *Afghan Star* "brings people together," "It's a place where men and women of all ethnicities stand together as equals," "It symbolised the freedom Afghans desire," and "It helps to combat racism and sexism."[46] *Afghan Star* provides a platform to discuss poignant topics such as sectarianism, gender equality, and freedom. It allows Afghans to engage in a shared, common experience, one which concentrates on the idea of a unified nation and creating that ideal.

The song "Hambastegī" or "Solidarity"[47] originally aired in 2018 in the finale of *Afghan Star* Season Twelve, epitomises the way Tolo utilises nationalism to attract viewers, and defines itself as the courier for Afghan national unity. The song features multiple languages and ethnicities, including Sikhs and Hindus – with populations numbering two to three thousand in Afghanistan – making them the smallest ethnic groups in the country.[48] In the television performance each ethnicity sang in its own language accompanied by Dari subtitles. As follows:

"Guria
Our flag is black, red, and green.

Baluchi
The country is our paradise and dignity,
Our god, our religion, and our land are one in the same.

Sikh and Hindu
This life is ours,
And our shadow is on our side.

Turkmen
Come let us become united until our flag always flies high,
Day and night we try to make the country flourish.

[44] Olson, "Only the Name Is New," 97.
[45] Marking, *Afghan Star* (Full Documentary) Real Stories, 31:52.
[46] Olson, "Only the Name Is New," 66.
[47] AfghanstarToloTV, Unity Song – *Afghan Star* S12 – Grand Finale, Online (Kabul, Afghanistan: 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=re4wlNwjnQM>.
[48] "Country Policy and Information Note Afghanistan: Hindus and Sikhs," Home Office UK (February 2017), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/590778/AFG_-_Sikhs_and_Hindus_-_CPIN_-_v3_1__February_2017_.pdf>.

Uzbek
Our flag is our soul
Like the blood in our veins,
The fluttering of this flag in the sky is our glory and happiness.

Shighnan
We love our homeland more than life,
We are kind in solidarity.

Nuristani
We are Nuristani girls,
It is expected of us that we show patient feelings,
We praise the occurrence of unity and equality.

Pashayi
We are a country with one voice,
We are united!"[49]

As each ethnic group sang their verse in their language, the producers depicted images of smiling Afghans from multiple provinces. This advanced the metaphorical image of a united Afghanistan of which the lyrics speak. The use of ethnic languages such as Sikh accompanied with subtitles in the national language, exposed viewers to Afghanistan's diversity while maintaining effective communication. Tolo also produced an accompanying music video panning Afghanistan's dramatic mountains, lush and green lands, harsh desert, and the Afghan flag fluttering in the wind.[50] The audience waved the flag in the television performance, reaffirming the idea that, with Afghan unity, "our flag" will stand tall. Although Afghan music has survived decades of war, it cannot veil the reality of past conflict and ongoing poverty. High unemployment and insecurity conflicts with the ideal of national unity because it highlights the social and economic inequality that underscores Afghanistan politics. Ten percent of the wealthiest Afghans control the country's economy and politics while the majority of the population cannot meet basic needs.[51] Although national unity at times seems far removed from Afghanistan's reality of war and poverty, Tolo is still able to mobilises ethnic and national unity to attract audiences. It appeals to sentiments that are sadly absent from the political sphere.[52]

The network's facilitation of nationalism and national unity also occurs outside the show's airtime. Before the final round of Season Twelve, Tolo News featured an article in Dari entitled, "Culture Activists Consider the Role of *Afghan Star* in National Unity."

[49] AfghanstarToloTV, Unity Song – *Afghan Star* S12 – Grand Finale.
[50] AfghanstarToloTV, Unity Song New Clip, Online (Kabul, Afghanistan: 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1Yx-DnwSDE>.
[51] Obaidullah Burhani, "Afghanistan's Economic Problems and Insidious Development Constraints," *Foreign Policy Journal*, accessed 6 May 2019, https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2018/10/25/afghanistans-economic-problems-and-insidious-development-constraints/>.
[52] Volcic and Andrejevic, "Commercial Nationalism on Balkan Reality Television," 125.

The article states that "the twelfth season of *Afghan Star* has been considered the most interesting *Afghan Star* programme. It has been said that this programme was effective in creating national unity between ethnic groups."[53] Zuzanna Olszewska's study of young Afghan poets in Iran found that many poets focused on national unity and did not divide their patriotism into ethnicity.[54] Such patriotism among the refugee community suggests that Afghans recognise unity as a mainstay in constructing a broader national identity. As the conversation about what it means to be "modern" and "Afghan" evolves in the Afghan diaspora, *Afghan Star* has cast its net of influence wider to include those communities via video auditions. Season Twelve's top twelve contestants included one contestant residing in Denmark and another whose family had migrated to Iran. As Afghans continue to flee their homeland, the importance of establishing a sense of national unity and identity increases. *Afghan Star* is one medium through which this conversation can occur.

In conclusion, this section has argued that *Afghan Star* indeed facilitates and ostensibly promotes national discussion about national identity. Its openness to all ethnicities and ages directly correlates to the modernity it envisions, and offers Afghans a place to not only express their artistic selves, but tell their story in the context of a national story.

**Performing on *Afghan Star***

*Afghan Star*'s success and the music it produces would be less influential without its charismatic characters. If Tolo as a national network must maneuver social, political, and economic hurdles, then the participants in its programmes are not exempt. Throughout *Afghan Star*, participants actively perform on the physical and metaphorical stage that Tolo provides to encourage discourse on national identity. This relationship between reality TV, the participants, and its audience was most apparent throughout Season Twelve of *Afghan Star*, particularly in the raps of winner Sayed Jamal Mubarez and runner up Zulala Hashemi.

***Afghan Star*'s women**

From a social perspective, *Afghan Star* has most notably normalised women's participation in society. It permits women to compete as equals and on the basis of talent with men. This is a notable development even within the history of *Afghan Star* itself. In the third season of *Afghan Star*, participant Setara Hussainzada was unable to return to her home in Herat after her elimination from the show. In her final performance, Setara allowed her headscarf to fall to her shoulders and danced around stage, swinging her hips and

[53] TOLOnews, " فرهنگیان نقش ستارهٔ افغان را در وحدت ملی اثرگذار میدانند [Cultural Activists Consider the Role of *Afghan Star* in National Unity]," 23 March 2017, https://www.tolonews.com/fa/afghanistan/%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%86%DA%AF%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%80-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%AB%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%86%D8%AF>.

[54] Zuzanna Olszewska, "'A Desolate Voice': Poetry and Identity among Young Afghan Refugees in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (1 April 2007): 213, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860701269550>.

moving her shoulders. Although she received death threats and could not return to her Herati residence, she defended her actions. In Season Twelve, nine years after Setara's provocative dance, Zulala Hashemi became the first woman to reach the final round of *Afghan Star*. In starkly different ways, Setara and Zulala became national symbols – Setara politicised to defend traditional female roles, while Zulala became a symbol of the marriage between old and new. Politicians, extremist groups, and advocates engage in a tense discussion in which Afghan women were posited as contentious symbol of nationhood – where women's honor was equated to the nation's honor.[55]

As the first woman to reach the finals Zulala Hashemi became an instant sensation among international aid agencies. However, the audience learns little about Zulala herself. Ethnically Pashtun and born and raised in Jalalabad, 150 kilometers east of Kabul, Zulala sings traditional Pashtun folk songs and symbolises more conservative and traditionalist views. Her mother encouraged her to audition for *Afghan Star*, before which she had never sung in public. Therefore, her courage to participate in such a popular and visible arena resonates with advocates for Afghan women's rights as well as Tolo's progressive attitude. Throughout the show Zulala maintains this shy and deferent persona. But at what price? In many ways, Tolo has utilised Zulala's character to promote its agenda in support of women's rights, but at the expense of Zulala's ability to express her own personality and views. While there is no evidence that Zulala was forced to represent Tolo's agenda, as with Mubarez, it is reasonable that Tolo recognised the potential of her character as an avenue through which to communicate their broader views.

Nonetheless, Zulala's success is an indicator for social change. Judge Aryana Sayeed, a popular London-based singer known for her outspoken support of Afghan women, said, "For the first time people voted for a girl – and one who comes from a very conservative province."[56] The judges praised Zulala for her polite and modest character. Her modesty and respect made her singing less provocative to conservative audiences. Her Pashtun heritage and proper display of female humility balanced the potentially offensive reality of a woman singing in public.

Season Twelve's seventh place winner, Shaqayeq Roya, was the antithesis to Zulala. Born of an Iranian mother and Afghan father, Shaqayeq grew up in Iran. She wears modern, sometimes tight-fitting clothes and uses hats and berets to cover her head often, revealing most of her hair. On stage, she is very animated and even argues with the judges and other contestants. However, it is likely that her Iranian background and immodesty contributed to the audience voting her off the show. Francois Jost argues that audiences favour participants more closely related to themselves and often favour race, ethnicity, and social background above talent. Upon her dismissal, Shaqayeq said she hoped people voted for talent and did not consider her Iranian accent.[57] Shaqayeq's concern illuminates

[55] Wazhmah Osman, "Thinking Outside the Box: Television and the Afghan Culture Wars" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2013): 129, http://search.proquest.com/docview/1316578572/?pq-origsite=primo>.
[56] AFP, "*Afghan Star*: Rap, Stilettos and a Musical Revolution," *Mail Online*, 18 March 2017, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/~/article-4326100/index.html>.
[57] AfghanstarToloTV, "Top 7 Elimination – *Afghan Star* S12 Episode 19," Online (Kabul, Afghanistan: 26 January 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAJgm7djNYY&index=17&list=PLqsbla5KGclqzo-W-4d_JjXLnvtDT73st>.

the differences in how Afghans in Afghanistan and the diaspora conceptualise Afghan modernity. It is important that *Afghan Star*, while it does not completely reconcile these two interpretations of "Afghanness," opens up a public space where both sides can express their arguments.

Throughout Season Twelve, the judges favoured Zulala – arguably the more "Afghan" participant of the two women. Zulala did not forcibly challenge social boundaries – in stark contrast to Shaqayeq, who infamously gloated in the face of a losing participant. Why was Zulala, with a less developed voice, more popular than the talented Shaqayeq? Jost says, "The public prefers bad singers who represent their community to a good singer deprived of a strong link with those whom he represents."[58] The singer's personal identity becomes a carrier for the community's wider identity. Zulala had stronger ties to Afghanistan and represented not only traditional values but traditional and folk-style music. Therefore, Zulala's character embodied a true Afghan modernity more effectively than Shaqayeq's foreign character.

Participants also extend the democratic forum for discussing national identity outside the show's boundaries. Zulala said that she is prepared to face the challenges that female artists in Afghanistan face. Her mother says, "She will overcome [the] ethnic problems"[59] that Season Twelve winner Mubarez often refers to when he sings about Afghanistan's unity – whether that is through supporting the Afghan national security forces, criticising the government, or advocating for women's rights. In a trio with Zulala and Babak Mohammadi, he raps:

> "What do I see in that chair but a perfect girl?
> I don't know if she is Pashto, or really Hazara,
> Is she Uzbek or Tajik?
> She is the shape of everything
> O God, all are beautiful
> She is an Afghan girl.
> Who are all the people of every ethnicity?
> All of them are the best."[60]

These lyrics promote the idea that one's ethnicity does not determine beauty; instead beauty and national identity trump ethnic differences. During the performance, the girl in the chair, Zulala, represents the "shape of everything." This means everything in Afghanistan – from the diverse landscape, to religion, to ethnic variety – comes together to create this idea of being Afghan. Zulala physically represents this "Afghanness" and

[58] Francios Jost, "When Reality TV Is a Job," in *Politics of Reality Television*, 41.

[59] TOLOnews, "راه یافتن دخترخانم و رپ خوان به دور نهایی ستاره افغان [A Girl and Young Rapper Find a Way to the Final Round of *Afghan Star*]," 1 March 2017, /fa/arts-culture/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87-%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%85-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D9%BE-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86>.

[60] AfghanstarToloTV, "Group Song – Dukhter Sardar," *Afghan Star* Season 12 Top 3 Elimination, Online (Kabul, Afghanistan: 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXafc_960Hw>.

shows that it is possible to be the "Afghan" girl in the chair of her country's future.

It also transforms Zulala from a merely a female singer to a national symbol. A woman's character has often been invoked to establish cultural authenticity in the debate of what constitutes true Afghan identity. In this performance, Tolo uses Zulala to bolster their credibility and establish a competitive, authentic vision and literal image of Afghanistan. The idea that all ethnicities can unite under the single banner of "Afghan," while maintaining ethnic identity and traditions, is also a trend in Mubarez's later performances.. The YouTube video of the performance of "Dukhter Sardār" has more than 1.3 million views, one of the most popular videos of that season. Afghans are actively engaged in the discussion of what it means to be Afghan; Zulala, Shaqayeq, and other female participants have been central to normalising women's participation in the national identity conversation.

**Rapping Afghanistan's Modernity**

A self-trained rapper and men's barber from Mazar-e Sharif, Mubarez' raps integrate social gender issues, economics, and politics into *Afghan Star*'s simulated democratic sphere. His original lyrics – coupled with his modest background – transcend societal boundaries that historically have favoured some groups over others and excluded women. Therefore, Mubarez' raps merge *Afghan Star*'s democratic forum with traditionally taboo subjects to transform public perception.

The rap "Peer Mujarad" (Old Single Man) uses economic arguments to critique traditional marriage processes, and also invokes love to activate tension between patriarchal authority and youthful rebellion. In the traditional engagement practice, the suitor, or khāstegār, goes to the woman's house to ask the father for her hand. The khāstegār brings a bouquet of flowers to the sister and mother, while the bride-to-be provides tea, sweets, and fruit. The families discuss the potential marriage, ask questions of the potential betrothed, and negotiate each party's economic contribution. The whole process is called khāstegārī. In "Peer Mujarad," Mubarez reflects on his own experience with khāstegārī, and critiques these traditions based on Afghanistan's current economic state.

Mubarez constantly refers to the fact that a wife costs money and "nobody wants to give a girl to a poor person." He warns young khāstegārān to be wary of marriage because the cost will make them resent their wives; according to Mubarez, if all is spent on attaining a wife, what is left for life after the wedding? According to the "Survey of the Afghan People," 54.5 percent of Afghans expressed unemployment as a reason for leaving Afghanistan, and young people aged eighteen to thirty were more likely to express a desire to migrate than any other age group.[61] Young, single men were more likely to express this desire than married men. Mubarez's use of economic issues like Khāstegārī broadens the discussion which occurs on *Afghan Star*, and facilitates inclusion of economic consideration in national discussions about Afghan national identity. This becomes even more important as Afghanistan becomes more uncertain and less secure.

[61] Mohammad Shoaib Haidary, et al., "Afghanistan in 2017: A Survey of the Afghan People," The Asia Foundation (2017): 171-173, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017_AfghanSurvey_report.pdf>.

Although Mubarez is only twenty-two, in the rap he worries about becoming old and that his poverty will prevent him from marrying. Recounting one khāstegārī, Mubarez raps,

> "He [the girl's father] said, "You have come to propose, how much do you make?
> You have come to propose, but where is your mother?
> You cannot fulfill my daughter's discontent.
> Get out of my house, may there be a curse on you!"[62]

Mubarez laments the fact that even if his is a good man, his income will determine if he stays single or not – and therefore if he will, in essence, become a man. These questions illustrate that families are most interested in finances because money equates to status, security, and the potential to leave poverty and the country. He asserts that he is a poor young man who "only earns 300 [Afghanis] a day, so where can he find 10,000 [Afghanis]?" Difficulty to secure a wife redefines traditional interpretations of what it means to be an "Afghan man."

Early on in the competition, Mubarez, composed "Inteqād Dowlāt" or "Critique of the Government." In the rap, he blames rich government officials for the country's poverty and unemployment; the government gives empty promises, does not care about security, and uses their position to only help themselves become richer instead of helping the poor. Rock and roll music accompanies the rap, which reflects the anger Mubarez expresses and highlights the way in which young artists increasingly utilise Western instrumentation to engage in political discussion. In his opening line, he asserts his anger and blames it on the government. Then he begins to list his grievances. He says,

> "The poor are martyrs while the wealthy are generals,
> People are in fear and dread,
> The security situation is dire."[63]

This juxtaposition of "martyrs and generals" is indicative of the respect the wealthy deny the poor. Although "martyr" has stronger religious undertones than the word "mujahideen" – which refers to those who fought in the jihad against the Soviets in the 1980s – Mubarez's use of the general term "shaheed" is meant to encompass all Afghans whom decades of conflict affected. In this verse, Mubarez claims that those in positions of power sacrificed the friendship of countrymen deemed inferior in order to achieve their status – trust between Afghans has hence deteriorated. People live in fear and dread of the security situation, as Mubarez raps, and also fear that government and military leadership cannot defend them, or are themselves immobilised by fear.

Government corruption one of the largest contributing factors to the unemployment

[62] Sayed Jamal Mubarez, "Peer Mujarad," Online (Kabul, Afghanistan: 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tp241tKpssQ>.
[63] Sayed Jamal Mubarez, "Inteqad Dowlat," Online (Kabul, Afghanistan: 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgswgNnQTvU>.

crisis in Afghanistan and resulting mass emigration.[64] Mubarez raps:

> "Those without work and who are desperate are fleeing from this country
> The number of unemployed youth in this country, I swear to God, it is a lot
> They [the government] promised that those who are educated will not stay unemployed
> That every young educated person will become an owner of a house
> But all the promises were destroyed
> The youth's contribution became blind and stiff […]"[65]

According to a recent survey, 27.9 percent of youth in Afghanistan are unemployed with 55.9 percent receiving only primary education or none at all.[66] Even educated youth struggle to find employment. Mubarez raps, "We kill because of unemployment" shedding light on the desperate situation. The unemployment rate has steadily increased since the withdrawal of NATO-led assistance forces in 2014.[67] His metaphor – that the potential of Afghanistan's youth has become "blind and stiff" - alludes to the government not caring about young people and thus removing their stake in society. He uses the word tābūt which not only means stiff, motionless or dead, but also a coffin or casket. This allusion to death and complete immobility creates an image of the youth being locked in a coffin: the government is burying them alive. However, by performing this intense, contempt-filled rap on a national stage – publically identifying the government as an enemy of the people – Mubarez normalises open critique of corruption and encourages action against it. By not using the word corruption, fesād in Dari, Mubarez can be more descriptive and appealing to his audience. If he can utilise a western medium to discuss central obstacles to Afghanistan's future, audience members are encouraged to overcome their inhibitions and engage in discussion.

Considering Tolo's history of political opposition, Inteqad-e Dowlat aligns with the network's critique of Afghanistan's convoluted and dynamic political system. The programme's voting method allows viewers to engage in a simulated democratic election. With presidential elections postponed for nearly three years and rife corruption, there are rare opportunities for Afghans to participate in a fair democratic process. Mubarez's critique reinforces the idea that Tolo is more responsible and democratic than the incumbent government. His claim metaphorically extends his stage to the audience and invites viewers to participate in the show's voting process, illustrating the possibility of a democratic modernity. However, one must be wary not to conflate Mubarez's motives with Tolo's. He chooses the topics of his raps based on what he sees every day in Afghanistan; he envisages that his raps will "open the pain and cries of the people," and

[64] Burhani, "Afghanistan's Economic Problems."
[65] Mubarez, "Inteqad Dowlat."
[66] Christina Wieser, Ismail Rahimi, and Silvia Redaelli, "Afghanistan Poverty Status Update: Progress at Risk," The World Bank (14 February 2017): 21, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/667181493794491292/Afghanistan-poverty-status-update-progress-at-risk>.
[67] Wieser, Rahimi, and Redaelli, "Afghanistan Poverty Status," 23.

are not informed by what Tolo instructs him to rap.[68]

While Mubarez's beliefs often align with Tolo's messaging, he himself has had conflicts with the network which he expressed in an Instagram live video, now available on his Facebook page.[69] His rap, "Rabete-yeh Khob" is a metaphor for his deteriorating relationship between himself and Tolo.[70] Viewers who understand the true meaning behind this rap, which occurred halfway through the season, may question the authenticity of later raps that promote national unity. Although his final performance included lyrics about the power of unity, Mubarez reveals that he struggled to define himself as a rapper and poet after his relationship with Tolo began to fray.[71] While his announcement solidifies Mubarez's position as the people's rapper, it also confirms that Tolo is a commercial venture which depends on its participants to remain within a limited political sphere. If participants become too political, as Mubarez does, it threatens the delicate balance Tolo has perfected between its political, economic, and social goals and its opposition.

This section has argued that although Mubarez may reveal Tolo's commercial nature, his raps enable *Afghan Star* to engage with a wider variety of topics within its semi-democratic format. Participants are not immune from the complex political web that Tolo and Moby Group navigate, but they do have creative license to add their personal interpretations of Afghan national identity into this labyrinth.

**Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to address questions concerning the reality television series *Afghan Star*. What is Tolo TV and what are its motivations in producing *Afghan Star*? To what extent does *Afghan Star* facilitate a discussion of Afghan national identity and unity? And how do the show's participants engage in this discourse? Tolo has successfully established itself as a bastion for national unity amidst a cluttered mediascape. Although social, political, and economic factors contribute to how Tolo formulates Afghan modernity, programmes such as *Afghan Star* provide a public forum in which Afghans can actively determine that modernity. *Afghan Star* has facilitated societal and cultural transformation in Afghanistan; it has challenged politicians and traditional values; and it has stirred contention in public life and offered a stage to express both grievances and delights. Overall, although commercial interests inherently underscore *Afghan Star*'s agenda, its semi-democratic processes and convincing characters facilitate a new public forum to discuss Afghan national identity.

Tolo has empowered and continues to empower a plethora of groups in Afghanistan: many men and women – both young and old, Tajiks, Hazaras, Pashtuns, and Uzbeks – believe it is possible to create a life that minimises violence and uncertainty. To use Kraidy's words, *Afghan Star* has "mobilised people, crystallised issues, and incessantly stressed the

[68] Sayed Jamal Mubarez, personal correspondence, Facebook messenger, 17 February 2018.

[69] Sayed Jamal Mubarez, "Jamal Mubariz جمال مبارز [Home]," Online (Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan: 2018), https://www.facebook.com/sayed.jamal.mubariz/videos/1569701799817888/..

[70] Mubarez, "Jamal Mubariz."

[71] Mubarez, "Jamal Mubariz."

questions 'what constitutes reality' while simultaneously preempting the formation of consensus on that question."[72] As Afghanistan continues to define itself as a nation, *Afghan Star* will continue to shape that identity – to promote its young lions and lionesses to dare to define their country's future.

[72] Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics,* 193.