

Meditations On by ISPA
Ahmad Sarmast Episode Transcription

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I'm your host, Ilter Ibrahimof.

Ahmad Sarmast

I was always telling to the media when they were asking me a question "The Taliban's are coming, what you're going to do? How we can stand against the Taliban and what could be stopping the Taliban?" I was always saying, and I continue to say, investing in arts and culture and education. They are the alternative to the ideology of radicalism, not just extremism Islam, to any extremism. They are the alternatives. You have to educate people. You have to get people involved in beauty, rather than killing.

Ilter Ibrahimof

That was Ahmad Sarmast, the founder and director of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music. Since opening its doors in Kabul in 2010. the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, or ANIM, has been a beacon of inspiration for countless young Afghan musicians, girls and boys, many from impoverished communities study and perform side by side in the same classroom and on the stage.

Winner of the prestigious Polar Music Prize in 2018, the school has been a source of national pride, and a symbol of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's renewed dedication to arts, culture and education. But what has the return of the Taliban meant for ANIM specifically, and music education in Afghanistan as a whole? How did the organization navigate the chaotic rapid fall of the previous government? And what are its plans for the future? In December of 2021, I sat down for an in person interview with Dr. Sarmast in his and the school's new home of Lisbon, Portugal.

Here is our conversation.

Ahmad Sarmast

When the international peacekeeping forces or coalition invaded Afghanistan in 2001, I was doing my PhD in Australia and very close to finish it when the situation changed. But of course, I was always following up the situation in Afghanistan, and it was always a dream to return back to Afghanistan one day when the condition is right. And when there's an opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the life of the people, that was always a dream.

In 2006, I decided to go back to Afghanistan to see what's happened. What was the impact of the draconian policies of the Taliban against music? What's the plan of the new government, whether they're focusing on music or whether music is one of the subject that the government

should focus on if they're interested to focus on music in Afghanistan? So I went back to Afghanistan to see what's happening and, to find out if I can be of any help and assistance.

So my findings, were extremely shocking, extremely shocking, not only in terms of the impact of the policies of the Taliban and the civil war that forced many people leave the country, historical place in ruins, but also to see that within the Afghan government and the new government, as well as within the donor community. In Afghanistan, there was no plan for music. There was no plan for music education, the majority of the musical space or musical air of Afghanistan was taken by foreign music. When I'm talking about foreign music, I'm not promoting restrictions. But again, it should be that the people of Afghanistan should have access to variety of music to diverse style of music, but nothing should be on the expense of their own musical identity. Nothing should be on the expense of Afghan musician, nothing should be on the expense of opportunities for the for the kids to get necessary musical skills and also to benefit from the healing power of music from the power of music that may contribute to mental development of kids and the youth of Afghanistan.

So nothing existed in that time. And that was continuous even until today because the time Taliban was sufficient long in power to brainwash a generation many people with a similar mentality with the Taliban they were still in in the African government. I was in Afghanistan when a member of the Afghan Parliament initiated a bill to forbid women from Visual Media and also to forbid women singing, and the singing of women being broadcast on Afghan TV. That was six years after the defeat of the Taliban.

But in 2010, when I established this school, and soon after, we begin to establish different ensembles and orchestras. And we began slowly to go to the community and also to slowly get out of Afghanistan to share the beauty of Afghan music with the rest of the people. I remember, the first tour, 90% of the comments were negative. Everything was based on narrow interpretation of the holy teaching of Islam, the same narrow interpretation, the Taliban were promoted the same narrow interpretation by which the Taliban brainwash the generation and we need time to re educate people about the importance of music, we need to educate the people about the place of music in Islam, we have to re educate the people of Afghanistan or the minority but very vocal minority that we re propagating against music that there's nothing explicit against music in Holy Islam is the narrow interpretation of a narrow minded, ignorant group of people. So I decided to go back to Afghanistan.

I remember when I first went my entire focus was to recruit students from orphanages. One of the reason for that was because other people might not allow their kids to study music. I remember in the group of students that I inherited from the School of Fine Arts, there were boys whose family did not know that they're studying music, forget about the girls. But within four years when the school began making headlines and make an impact on the community, and show to the community that Listen, guys, there's nothing wrong with music for boys and the girls. And through music, we can change the communities transform the lives, build bridges between different ethnic group of Afghanistan, build bridges between Afghanistan and the international community, go outside, share our beauty of music with the rest of the world and

come back. Again, the media coverage was huge 95 to 99% of the post were positive posts. But of course, there were people who could make one of those conservative based comments on the same interpretation of Islam, the Taliban were promoted. So that's how the situation changed.

Our program in 2010, began with one girl, but by 2017, we were in a position to establish a whole women's Orchestra of Afghanistan. Not only that orchestra, but we were also in a position to train the first female conductors in Afghanistan. When I first went to Afghanistan, it was not just I'm going, I sit with the musician, I talk with them. And in each organization, I was talking, and I was listening to them. And I was listening and sharing their concern. And towards the end of my trip, I could see that those people were looking at me as someone who they can trust.

Because from 2001 to 2006, when I went there, there was a lot of music initiative, that hundreds of 1000s, and millions of dollars were invested. But the result was not there. None of those programs changed the life of Afghan musicians, none of those programs created a condition for a long term sustainable project. Missing was the fundamentalness of the project, something sustainable something to create job opportunities for Afghan musicians, to create opportunities for the kids to study music, and also to give the voice of Afghan people to give back Afghan people a voice on the media on the space of Afghan music, to listen about their own music, practice their own music, but all while at the same time, give them an opportunity to embrace other musical culture as well.

But within the Afghan government also, there was nothing. Back a bit later in 2008 with the Minister of Culture, and when I went to talk to him and to see what his plans to do for music. I was shocked to hear how much this minister of culture was ignorant about the importance of diversity, how much he was not appreciating diversity, and even the diversity of Afghan musical culture itself, which is very rich. He did not see that his job is to preserve that variety of music that belongs to the Afghan people. One of his first comments was that he turned to me and said Dr. Sarmast, when you're going to free us from the influence of raga and Tala. This is the two basic principle of Afghan traditional music which has got, very deep, deep connection with the Hindustani music from India. That music was imported to Afghanistan. And for centuries, Afghanistan was located between two big cultures. It was part of this two big cultures. Afghanistan serve as a transit point between cultures ideas from north to the south, and from south to the north. But he did not even recognize that that Hindustani music or classical music of Afghanistan based on Hindustani music, it is part of a musical tradition now. It has been introduced three hundred years back to Afghanistan. But now it became part of a musical life. And it's got now its own specifics that is missed in Hindustani music. So I was shocked by that kind of ignorance.

But the second biggest challenge was how to get the money. How to convince the donor community that investing in arts and culture, it's as important investing in Afghan army in Afghan police, it's as important as important in education, you can bring a long and sustainable peace without investing in arts and culture without respecting the cultural life of the people. I spoke to the Embassy of Australia, and the project that I was selling in Afghanistan or trying to drum up

support for it. It was initiated in Australia, I'm an Afghan Australian, I went there, and I said, Alright, there might be some sympathy within that embassy. But after my long lecture about the importance of music for Afghanistan, he turned to me and he said, Dr. Sarmast, you convinced me, but it will be very hard for me to convince my government. Music is a luxury for Afghanistan, which is for granted given to the rest of the board. But for Afghanistan, Afghan children, Afghan youth and Afghan people, that's a luxury, it become a luxury.

I was living in Kabul until the 12th of July, I remember that day very, very well, because in this day, my flight was in the evening. But during the day, I had a big press conference, during which I introduced two new songs that our school commissioned to the old media of Afghanistan. And this two songs were aimed to raise awareness about the arrival of the Taliban, to support the Afghan army to stand for the interests of the people of Afghanistan. No one could expect the Taliban gonna come into power so soon. We all believed and trusted in the power of our Afghan army, their commitment to the people of Afghanistan, but what's happening was exactly what I was worried about. The army will not be defeated. But it will be the politician who gonna make deals. Those deals can be based on ethnicity can be based on personal interest, those deals can be based on pressure from the outside world, but that's going to happen.

I remember back in April, when the United States announced that they're gonna withdraw their forces. I had number of expat faculty and they ran to my office and Dr. Sarmast, we're resigning were leaving, because the US is leaving and the army gonna collapse. And I said, nothing's gonna happen, believe me. Don't rush. Stay here. Let's see what the next few weeks and months gonna bring to us. And I was telling them that, my fear is that we're going to repeat the mistakes or the scenario of 1992 when the regime of President Najibullah collapsed because of external reasons. Yes. In the financial support from the USSR in that time, or Russia, yes. But what really led to his collapse, it was deal based on ethnicity, between member of his party and army with the Mujahideen. That was my fear, and my worry, and that's exactly happened.

It was brought to my attention. Do you have any plan? What's your plan for the school? I was not thinking of that. And I was always thinking that, no, we're not going to reach to that stage, everything will be fine. The people of Afghanistan not going to accept the Taliban, the Taliban does not have roots within the communities within the people. And it's true. You see now from the first week that the Taliban can come into power demonstration after demonstration, Protest after protest, women and men young and old, different ethnic groups. So that was brought to my attention from other people, but I never thought that it's gonna come up. I never thought that the situation going to change over night, and overnight, our school will be shut down. And it will be the only educational entity that is totally under armed control of the Taliban and they've got 70 armed people on the ground of my school today? I never thought that.

During this time in July, when I moved to Australia I was in quarantine in a hotel. A former ambassador of Afghanistan called me from a Western country to say that Hey Dr. Sarmast there are friends of the orchestra, they're offering asylum to your students, can you give us with a list? And I got mad on this guy. And I said, Listen, we don't need any asylum. We don't need

any reason to spread fear within the community panic within the community. But when that happened, of course, I could not just turn my back to my staff, to my students, to my faculty, all this 12 years we've been together. For the good and for the bad. All the success of this school has been shared, and it was the result of a collective work. So I could not turn my back.

Knowing that the Taliban definitely going to ban music, they will definitely act against my faculty, against my students against my staff.

So my top priority become, how I can help, how I can ensure the safety and the security of my team. When I speaking, my team it involved everyone in the school community, almost 500 people. But that was a top priority in that time -- how to save them. And my appeal was very simple. Very simple. Save us today. So we can sing again tomorrow. That was the message.

I was very pleased that the government of Portuguese positively responded, and I received a phone call from the Minister of Defense, that Dr. Sarmast your appeal reached to our government, and we are happy to assist you. We happy to evacuate you from Afghanistan, happy to help you to reopen the school here. And to reform your orchestras. The Portuguese agreed to help us but there was no money for chartering an airplane, the only hope was to get on a flight of the US to get the group to Doha or to Qatar or to somewhere and then the rest would be easy.

And that's why our first attempt was with the US on the 28th of August before the closure of the Kabul airport before the last American soldier left Afghanistan. So there was a team working behind the scenes to make the evacuation happen. So we reached Kabul airport in seven buses, we not only got the entire community out of Afghanistan, but now we've got an opportunity also to keep them together, enable them to make music again together. And not only make music and learn music, and continue their education, but also to give something to the rest of the world, which is the beauty of Afghan music. Share it with the rest of the world, enable other people to learn it and to play an Afghan instruments as well.

We're going to begin with something small, but I'm very, very pleased that the friends of our school is very active around the world. And I totally can count on them that we will not be a burden on the government of Portugal, we will be able to bring extra resources for the establishment of this school for the needs of the school while at the same time, we will be very appreciative of everything that the government of Portugal going to offer to us and help us even to eventually get the school in their educational system of the country. It will be a huge, huge endeavor.

I see the music school here not as a small, isolated island of Afghan music somewhere. That's not the aim, that's not the vision, the school will be open to everyone. And its mission transforming lives through music will be the same. Making music accessible to disadvantaged communities here to refugee communities to poor communities to low income families, that would be there. Commitment to musical diversity would be there. But main job of ANIM students and ANIM faculty would be preserving their musical tradition. The school should serve as a place for multiculturalism, as a place for intercultural dialogue through music as a place where

people can come and learn about Afghan music. It can be a center for research, it can be a center for learning about Afghan languages about Afghan culture.

I even can see now the school much bigger than a small music school. I can see it as a big cultural center capable to contribute to the cultural, educational and musical life of Portugal. That's what I see the school here. And the school should continue its life here while this professional musician can go back to their own country, to pay back to the community and to the people of Afghanistan.

Ilter Ibrahimof

Meditations On is presented by ISPA.

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