

Afghan Government to Curb Wedding Costs

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Draft law would see outlay on lavish celebrations restricted.

The City Star wedding hall in Kabul was a blaze of sparkling lights, welcoming the fancily-dressed guests thronging to a wedding ceremony.

Stepping out of an expensive car, one young woman dressed in the latest fashion asked, "Why shouldn't people fulfill their wishes? Life is too short. Why do people earn money if not to spend it on things like this?"

Smiling, she added, "I bought this dress from Dubai for 1,500 US dollars. Is that enough?"

Standing outside under a tree, the father of the groom, 50, looked less happy. Since his son got engaged, he said, he had spent 15,000 dollars on various wedding costs, not including the actual day itself.

"Marriage is ruination," he said with a sigh. "We have invited 700 people, at 14 dollars a head. You do the maths. I have borrowed all the money. We will have to work hard for several years to pay off the debts, but we have to hold a party like this because of family competitiveness."

Marriage is big business in Afghanistan, driven by a sense of competition, family honour and pride. No celebration is complete without a lavish guest list, costly jewelry, new outfits, a band of musicians and a sumptuous wedding feast – usually so extravagant that half is thrown away.

The average wedding ceremony costs up to 20,000 dollars. Both families invite large numbers of guests, but the bill is footed by the groom's side.

Critics of the practice say this kind of such expenditure places a massive strain on households in a country where 30 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line and four million are unemployed. Young men are often forced to go abroad illegally to find work and raise the money to get married.

To pay for his engagement ceremony Khaled, 23, sold a plot of land he inherited from his father in the north of Kabul. To get the funds for the wedding itself, he went to Iran, but was arrested as an illegal immigrant and spent two years in prison there before being deported.

"Now my fiancée's family is insisting I marry her, or they will make sure she gets engaged to somebody else," he said. "I don't know where to get the money from. As things are, I don't make enough to cover my family's living costs."

President Hamid Karzai recently declared that such lavish spending went against Islamic principles.

"The wealthy must hold parties that cost less, to set an example for other members of society," he said.

A new government proposal would see the cost of weddings and engagements regulated by law. The justice ministry has drafted regulations limiting the maximum number of guests to 50, and capping the price of the wedding meal.

Ministry spokesman Farid Najibi said the regulations were designed not only to control prices, but also to challenge what some believe are harmful customs.

Hamidullah, an economics lecturer at Kabul university, said expensive weddings was damaging to the national economy as well as to individual households.

"Since we have no domestic production and all goods are imported, purchasing huge quantities of items reduce the supply in the marketplace," he said. "Besides, the cost of wedding ceremonies is constantly rising, and young men are forced to earn money by illegal means, which harms our society."

Abdul Rahman Kalakani of the ministry for religious affairs said wasting money was against Islamic law.

"Costly weddings and expensive jewelry and clothes are contrary to the faith," he said. "Such costs not only cause problems between the families of the bride and the groom, they cause God's displeasure."

The Taleban, too, have been preaching moderation in the name of Islam. A year ago, in what was interpreted as a hearts-and-minds effort to win support amongst a younger generation, the insurgents issued an edict in the Tagab district of Kapisa province, north of Kabul, restricting the amount that could be paid for engagements, weddings and other ceremonies. (See **Taleban Try Hearts-and-Minds Tactics**.)

But while some may welcome the government's planned restrictions, those in the wedding business say they will be bad for business, and in any case will be difficult to enforce. The owners of wedding reception venues say they have already invested heavily.

One Kabul hotel owner, who preferred to remain anonymous, said that 4,000 people might be invited to a wedding, with prices running at 20 dollars a head.

"Some businessmen and high-ranking government officials spend even more, and their parties cost up to 100,000 dollars," he said. "People compete with each other and it is obvious that we make more money out of to this competition."

The hotel owner was furious about the new bill, saying, "Karzai's laws are useless. People will not keep to such things."

Mohammad Salam, head of the hoteliers' association, agreed that it would be impossible to make people adhere to any such law.

"Even if the law is passed, it will only be put into practice with regard to poor and ordinary people," he said. "No institution can enforce such a law on government officials or other powerful individuals."

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