

## **Cinemas Face Increased Competition**

**Author:** [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Many would now prefer to watch a DVD at home or at a local restaurant than a censored film in a theatre.

Like young people everywhere, Jowad loves watching movies. But that doesn't mean that he's rushing down to the local movie theatre to catch the latest release.

Instead, the 23-year-old can more likely be found buying a DVD at a local shop.

"Cinemas are so rushed and disorganised," he said. "I love to buy DVDs and watch them with my family at home."

Jowad said there are other reasons why he prefers watching movies at home rather than going out to a theatre.

"I can see this film many times, but in the cinema, I can only see it once," he said. "And in the cinema, there are no educational films. Afghan and Indian films show people either fighting or living in luxury."

Jowad's preference to watch films at home is bad news for theatre owners in Kabul. Once highly popular and only recently reopened after the fall of the Taleban, cinemas now find themselves competing against a flood of cheap DVDs and home-made music videos readily available in the city.

Najeeb said he's doing a booming business selling DVDs in the centre of Kabul.

"Every day I sell between 20 and 30 DVDs," he said. "It's a good business."

With pirated copies of the latest releases readily available for as little as 50 afghanis, or about one US dollar, and inexpensive Chinese-made DVD players flooding the market at 40 dollars each, many see no reason to pay 19 afghanis, or about 35 cents, for a ticket to a cinema.

In addition, many shish-kebab restaurants and ice cream shops now play music videos and foreign films on DVD, giving new meaning to the idea of dinner and a movie.

And unlike the films shown at both government and privately owned theatres, these films are uncensored and can be seen in the evenings.

Many young people said they prefer to visit restaurants and ice-cream shops where the films and music videos can be seen for free.

Mohammad Rafi, 22, said he only watches films in small restaurants.

"It is not good for young people to go to the cinema" because it will hurt their moral character, he said.

But he's more than happy to watch a movie being shown in a shop where food is being served. "If we are watching films in restaurants or ice-cream shops, then we are not wasting our time," Rafi said.

Meanwhile, old theatres are being renovated and reopened in the capital.

Just last month, the Aryana commercial cinema reopened after nine months of renovation costing more than 110,000 dollars, provided by France.

"Watching films and going to the cinema provides an opportunity for people to relate to each other," said Renaud Donnedieu de Uabres, a French government spokesman, explaining why his country financed the project.

"The aim is to provide a place for families to view films and where men, women and children could mingle freely, he said.

But some wonder just how large an audience this new theatre will attract.

The 700-seat Cinema Aryub reopened shortly after the fall of the Taleban government in 2001. But its owner said most of the time now, less than a quarter of the seats are filled.

"In these days we do not have many customers," said Mohammed Karim. "[As a result]we are unable to pay the salaries of the officers, the tax and the other expenses."

Abdul Jameel Sarwar, the assistant director of the Afghan film office, said his agency regulates 48 cinemas throughout the country but only five are currently showing movies.

His agency, which is part of the ministry of information and culture, regulates everything from the type of film that can be shown to when theatres are allowed to open.

In addition, the film office requires that theatres play at least two Afghan films each month, even though Indian or American movies are much more popular.

All foreign films are reviewed and censored before they are shown. While his office does not remove dance scenes from a film, it will cut portions of a movie that shows couples touching. If there's more than two minutes of such scenes in a film, the entire movie is banned, Sarwar said.

DVDs purchased at local shops or shown at restaurants and ice-cream shops face no such restrictions.

Some conservative religious leaders warn that even such censorship isn't enough and support the Taliban's view that watching films is against Islam.

Mullah Amir Jan, Imam of the Baba Kaidani Mosque, said that "Going to cinemas and watching films is against Sharia law, and it will lead people astray. This is an Islamic country, and building cinemas is the work of non-Muslims".

So the cinema owners are caught between the religious conservatives and the liberalising influence of cheap new technology. Some want the state to step in and help them.

Karim would like to see the government ban restaurants and other public places from showing movies. Otherwise, he warns, the state will end up running most of the nation's movie theatres.

Still, there are some who enjoy going to the movies. Haroon, 14, a student from Herat province, said, "In Herat there is no cinema and during school time, I can't go to the restaurant to watch films. So when I come to Kabul, . . . I like to go to the cinema."

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