

Youth Turn to Western Fashions

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Some are turning in their blue burkas for blue jeans, while others are going for the latest hairstyles.

Apparently inspired by fashions they see in films from Bollywood as well as Hollywood, young people in the Afghan capital Kabul are shedding traditional clothes for outfits that would have been unthinkable during the five years of Taleban rule that ended in 2001.

"I watch Indian films for the clothes, because Indian actresses wear fascinating Punjabi costumes," Belqis, 33.

While women clad in blue burkas are still a common sight on the streets of Kabul, Belqis' s only concession to traditional clothing is a headscarf. She told IWPR that she had two Indian saris at home and was delighted to be able to make her own fashion choices without harassment.

Both men and women seem anxious to keep up with the latest fashions. For barbers, hair stylists and clothes sellers, business has never been better. Baseball caps, jeans and denim jackets can be seen everywhere in the capital, especially around schools when classes get out.

"I'll follow fashion until I get over my resentment of the Taleban era," said Jamaluddin, 25. Sporting sunglasses and a black sleeveless shirt, with his hair parted down the middle, he said he took his sartorial inspiration from Indian film star Tere-Naam after watching one of his movies.

"The hairstyle of the hero caught my attention," he said. "I wanted to have hair like him. If they can wear it, why can't we?"

Under the Taleban, women were not allowed to appear outside without a burka. Makeup and fingernail polish were forbidden. Beauty salons, now seen on nearly every shopping street in Kabul, were closed.

Long beards and turbans or other headgear were required for men. Long hair was prohibited. Suits and ties were considered too western.

Some people don't like the sudden surge in style-consciousness.

"Instead of being beneficial, fashion is becoming detrimental," said resident Sayed Sharafuddin, who sees the new styles as an intrusion of western culture.

Mohammad Azam, also of Kabul, agreed, "Our young people... are engaged in frivolous competition - I mean styles that don't have any benefit except wasting their families' money."

Ahmad Seddiq Delir, a staffer in the national ministry of youth, said officials there are concerned about what they see as a dilution of traditional Islamic culture, and will be paying more attention to what young people are wearing.

The ministry is planning a conference to "discuss strategies for the young generation", he said.

The growing interest in fashion has been a boon for merchants.

Abdul Maroof, 22, sells trousers and t-shirts, mostly imported from Turkey and South Korea.

"There are a lot of clothes-lovers and their pockets are full of money," he said. "Whatever price we set, they won't say no." That in itself is a departure from tradition in Afghanistan, where bargaining is usually an integral part of shopping.

Shabir Roshan, 22, owns the Roshan City Tower shop in Shar-e-Naw, the city's main shopping district. "Since our people, especially youngsters, are so interested in fashion, we've imported the most modern clothes from the European market," he said.

His latest offering is deliberately frayed jeans.

Some barbers say they can't handle all their new customers.

"Most of the kids want haircuts like film stars," said Maroof Shah, owner of Sikandar barbershop. "Most of them don't know the name of the style, and they try to explain it. We keep catalogues so they can show us."

But while styles may be changing, Islamic attitudes have not, insists Ehsanulrahman, a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

It is haram, or prohibited by Islamic law, for men to wear silk clothes or gold, he said, adding, "Women wearing makeup in public is haram, whether their husbands let them or not."

Some young Afghans have their own ideas, however.

"Everybody wants to follow their own inclinations, and I don't want to give up my mine for other people," said Parwin, 19, heavily made up, wearing pointed-toed shoes and toting a white mobile phone as she chatted with classmates outside a private school.

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