

Lifestyle | Features

ONLINE AFGHAN HUMOR: LAUGHTER AS RESISTANCE AGAINST TALEBAN

When a Taliban militant meets Afghan pop star Ayra Sayeed, he tries to charm her. "If you marry me, I will have a beard and a moustache and tanks. And I will build you a nightclub!" The scene, completely unimaginable in real life with the singer now based in exile after fleeing in the wake of the Taliban's takeover, is part of a satirical YouTube animation series that has captivated Afghans in recent weeks. It shows Sayeed appearing to the militant in his dreams. But then the man, sleeping with his Kalashnikov slung around his shoulder, wakes up to reality to find he is in fact hugging a bearded fellow militant. The militant is then shown in another video proudly showing off how life has changed in Kabul since the Islamist fundamentalists took control in mid-August. He comes upon a woman wearing an Arab-style niqab face veil.



Afghan Hafiz Afzali, 34, sits in front of a computer screen at his home and models 3D characters for his YouTube videos, in Espoo, Finland. — AFP photos



Afghan Hafiz Afzali, 34, sits in front of a computer screen at his home and applies textures to a 3D character for his YouTube videos.



Afghan Hafiz Afzali, 34, poses for a picture near his home in Espoo, Finland.

"Are you a genie, a fairy or a human?" he inquires, reflecting the confusion of locals when faced with such garb, now being promoted by the Taliban. Producing such work could be lethal in Afghanistan under the Taliban, where

many artists are in hiding and even ordinary people have erased potentially compromising material from their phones. The author of the videos is Afghan refugee Hafiz Afzali, 34, who has lived in Finland for the past seven years. He left Afghanistan in 2000 during the first phase of Taliban rule ended by the 2001 US-led invasion.

He ended up in Finland via a long, clandestine route to Europe and puts together his videos on YouTube during the week, while working as a taxi driver at the weekend. "I left Afghanistan at the age of 13, when the Taliban was in power. I remember everything," said Afzali, who came to Finland after living for three years in Iran, one year in Turkey and seven in Greece.

'Empty hearts'

Afzali is a self-taught expert in 3D design and is perfecting his skills at a Helsinki university. This has allowed him to create more than 200 comic

videos that started out by targeting the deposed pro-Western Afghan government, which critics accused of being riddled by corruption. But now his sights are set on the Taliban. "Their guns may be full of bullets but their hearts are empty," he told AFP. Several of his works have enjoyed more than 1.7 million views. "It works very well. People get the message because it's visual," Hafzali said.

"I want to send my message to Taliban leaders and Taliban followers that we are free human beings, we're not going to accept this rule. I think the majority of people don't want to accept this." His attitude is shared by Musa Zafar, a prominent Afghan satirist. Zafar fled the country in 2016 but refuses to disclose where he is living now for security reasons. "Satirists make people laugh, while being informative like media," of which Afghans are "tired" because their usual flow of information is "depressing", he said.

'Narrow-mindedness'

Satire can also make the political figures targeted "think twice" about the way they govern and the measures they take, said Zafar, who posts his work under the name "Imam Musa". One of his jokes recently posted on Afghanistan International, a widely read news site for Afghans, referenced vegetables to poke fun at the Taliban. "A new committee has been formed within the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice to discuss the shape of cucumbers, eggplants and pumpkins" — in case they resemble sexual organs.

For the same reasons, "bakers now have two weeks to produce bread that is neither round nor long," he continued. His post echoed the televised statements of a pro-Taliban cleric who at the end of September advised women "not to put on perfume when they leave their homes", nor to wear shoes with heels or click them on the ground lest they arouse men. "The ignorance and narrow-minded-

ness of the Taliban energizes satirists," said Imam Musa. In contrast to colleagues living in exile abroad, the artist Mergan Punch — a pseudonym — has decided to continue living in Kabul where he works in hiding.

He opened an account on social media where his drawings are published, including an image of a Taliban leaning on a mallet which he has used to kill two doves, the symbol of peace. "They have not changed. They want to put their mullahs in power and make Afghanistan the country of terrorists", he said. Back in the relative safety of Finland, Afzali said he "cannot believe" his country has "gone a century back" with the Taliban's reconquest of Afghanistan. "I know it's really difficult to live under the Taliban. Because I have seen it and I used to live under it. I'm really sorry for those who are there." — AFP



Die-hard Rolling Stones fan Elisabeth Zours poses with an autographed LP album of the legendary British rock band, in Berlin. — AFP

Start me up: Stones superfan jumps as US travel ban ends

Elisabeth Zours saw her first Rolling Stones show in East Berlin in 1990, just after the fall of the Wall, and nothing was ever quite the same again. Since then, barely a year has passed without the German office manager catching the still spry rockers on stage somewhere in the world—that is, until the pandemic and the US travel ban. Now with the United States reopening its borders on Monday to fully-vaccinated foreign visitors after a more than 18-month block on travel from much of the globe, the 51-year-old Zours will be among the first in line.

Like so much else, her life-long Stones marathon came to a screeching halt with the virus outbreak. "The tickets I still had from the (cancelled) 2020 US tour were still good but the travel ban was in place and I didn't know if I would be able to use them," she said. "And then (drummer) Charlie Watts died (in August) — it was all an emotional rollercoaster."

'This could be it'

Zours, who's seen the band in action dozens of times—"in the high double digits", — said superfans like herself worried the tour might never resume given the Stones' advanced age. She had a ticket for the St. Louis show, the first since Watts's death, on September 26 and held out hope that Joe Biden would loosen the rules in time. "I even thought about traveling via a third country to try to get into the States, then decided it was too risky," she said. "I ended up watching it (the Watts tribute) in the middle of the night in bed on a livestream."

Zours was "frustrated" that even months after the EU opened up to US travellers, the door to America was still

shut to Europeans. "It made no sense—especially for those of us who are vaccinated" and while US infection rates were generally far higher than in most EU member states. So when the White House finally heralded the good news on October 15, Zours knew she'd be on the first plane.

"Now I've got tickets for four concerts, starting in Atlanta then Detroit, Austin and Hollywood, Florida," said Zours, who plans a three-week odyssey to catch up with the band. For the last several years, being a massive Stones' fan has been a bit like living on borrowed time, Zours admitted—you never know when your luck will run out. "You're always aware it could be the last tour," she said. "But now that Charlie Watts is dead, this really could be it."

'Broken hearts, sad goodbyes'

Zours's love for the Stones reaches back to her early adolescence. "I fell for a classmate and the Stones were a way to get to know him better," she said. "It was the 80s and I'd force him to record the albums on cassettes for me. Nothing happened with the guy but the Stones are still with me." She's conscious of the fact that all the travelling to indulge her life's passion comes at a price. "The climate summit (in Glasgow) is happening right now and it's an issue that's really important to me," Zours said, noting she tried to offset transatlantic trips with things like eating less meat. Then there are some of the Stones' songs themselves whose macho swagger hasn't held up well over time.

"Brown Sugar", "Under My Thumb"—it's true, some of the lyrics are problematic. But I never saw the band as misogynistic or felt put down by them—they empower me." Just as many families are looking forward to the end of the US travel ban for emotional reunions, Zours said seeing the Stones again in their element will feel like coming home. "Their music is like a good friend—it's helped me through crises since I was 12: broken hearts, sad goodbyes, times when I was down," she said. "Whenever I hear their music I feel good again." — AFP

Founding member of reggae pop giants UB40 Astro dies after illness

Former vocalist and founding member of British reggae group UB40, who rose to fame in the 1980s with hits like "Red Red Wine" and "Can't Help Falling In Love" has died at the age of 64, his band confirmed. Terence Wilson—who went by the stage name Astro, performed with UB40 until 2013, when he formed a breakaway band. "We are absolutely devastated and completely heartbroken to have to tell you that our beloved Astro has today passed away after a very short illness," his current band, UB40 featuring Ali Campbell and Astro, said on Twitter late Saturday.



Terence Wilson

"The world will never be the same without him."

His former band confirmed the news, saying Wilson had died after "a short illness". UB40's pop reggae cover of Neil Diamond's "Red Red Wine" propelled them to fame, with the band going on to sell more than 100 million records. They also held the record-shared with Madness—for most weeks spent in the UK singles chart in the 1980s. Hailing from the British Midlands' city of Birmingham, the group rode a wave of youthful discontent against the economic and political status quo, with their name referring to a form provided to people claiming unemployment benefits.

Drummer Jimmy Brown told the Guardian this year that the group had even been under surveillance by British intelligence. "MI5 were tapping our phones, watching our houses, all sorts," he said. "We weren't planning the revolution, but if the revolution happened, we knew what side we were going to be on." — AFP



People walk over the Bow Bridge before fall foliage in Central Park in New York. — AFP

How climate change is muting America's famous fall foliage

America's northeast is famous for its red, orange and yellow fall foliage but experts say climate change is dulling the colors and delaying peak season, causing concern for the region's multi-billion-dollar "leaf-peeping" tourist industry. Warmer temperatures and heavier rainfall are keeping leaves greener for longer while extreme weather events like heat-waves and storms are stripping trees bare before getting to autumn, according to conservationists.

"Climate change is making it less likely that we're going to get those perfect fall color displays," Andy Finton, a forest ecologist with the Nature Conservancy in Massachusetts, told AFP. Several delicate factors combine for leaves to turn the vibrant colors that adorn picture postcards from New England and see visitors flocking to states like Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire every October.

The right combination of heat and precipitation in the summer followed by sunny days and cooler nights as the days start to shorten are required for chlorophyll to break down, unveiling the yellow and orange carotenoid pigments that turn ash and birch trees a golden hue. But the more complicated process by which leaves produce sugar that creates the red anthocyanin pigments seen in sugar maple and black gum trees is worrying arborists the most.

Hotter days, coupled with warmer nights and overcast skies caused by increased precipitation are slowing down photosynthesis, threatening those deep red colors beloved by "leaf-peepers." "What you're gonna see is more muted colors," said Finton. Leaf-peeping is a slang term in the United States used to describe the recreational activity of traveling to see and photograph autumnal colors.

Numerous tracking websites try to predict where and when peak fall foliage will occur as it makes its way south through

New England, including Massachusetts and Connecticut, and into New York. But ecologists say climate change is pushing the season back, making it harder to predict when the leaves will turn and threatening to shorten the window if it is followed by a quick cold snap.

Stephanie Spera, an environmental scientist at the University of Richmond, is studying the impact of climate change on fall foliage in Acadia National Park in Maine. "What we are seeing is that it is about a full week later than it was in the 1950s," and now arrives around the second week of October, Spera told AFP. Barbara Brummer, a field biologist with the Nature Conservancy's New Jersey office, estimates it was at least two weeks late this year "from what typically might have happened 100 years ago."

Pests and disease

Fall foliage tourism is big business in the northeast. It contributes \$300 million to Vermont's economy alone every year, according to official figures. In autumn, upwards of 500 people visit Polly's Pancake Parlor in New Hampshire every day to marvel at the colors on display in the White Mountains. The restaurant has been recording when leaves change color since the 1970s to keep track of how weather was impacting footfall.

"Fall is a huge part of our business and customers would ask, 'When's the best time to visit?'" owner Kathie Cote told AFP, adding that she was "definitely concerned" about climate change. "Alejandro Bertagnoli, a 31-year-old tourist from Argentina, and his girlfriend visited New York's Central Park in early November and were surprised by how green the leaves still were. "The pictures do seem different from what you usually see. But it's still enjoyable," he told AFP.

Warmer, wetter temperatures are also helping invasive pests and disease live longer and spread further, according to Pete Smith, urban forestry program manager at the Arbor Day Foundation. "There's nothing worse for fall color than a dead tree," he told AFP. Extreme weather events are also wreaking havoc. In September, heavy rain and powerful winds brought by Hurricane Ida brought down trees and knocked leaves off branches. — AFP