

AFGHANISTAN DISPATCH

## ***For Decades, This Radio Station Named the Dead. Few Still Listen.***

Afghans once tuned into Radio Afghanistan twice a day to hear the reading of death notices. But in an age of social media, the voice of the nation has lost much of its sway.

By Mujib Mashal   Photographs by Jim Huylebroek

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Through decades of coups, invasions and endless war, Afghans tuned their radios to Radio Afghanistan every morning at 7 and every afternoon at 4:05 to hear the names of the newly dead.

One of the voices they often heard reading those death notices belongs to Mohamad Agha Zaki, at the mic for the state broadcaster for more than 42 years now. For much of that stretch, his counterpart at the station has been Ziauddin Aziz, the clerk who rushes to Mr. Zaki with the messages the public brings to the station's small "Death Advertisements" window.

"Ads today?" Mr. Zaki, half asleep, asked on a recent dawn after opening the door to Mr. Aziz's knock. Outside, birds chirped and the new day's soft light covered the peaks of the tall pine trees in the station's compound in Kabul, the capital.

No, said Mr. Aziz, who had waited behind the door in the kind of deference saved for masters of a different era. They had gone weeks without anyone arriving at the little window — just four ads in 40 days, though certainly many more had died.

The senior announcer had been asleep on the couch in the "Anchor's General Department" overnight. But his waking there felt like a ceremony replayed over decades, the couch and pillow indented with his shape, worn in over time.

On the wall, behind a large desk, was a glass display with about 300 photos, bearing the title "Beloved Anchors, from Yesterday to Today." Some are dead, many are abroad. Mr. Zaki — who started at the radio as a 20-year-old student of literature — is there in black and white, clean-shaven, his mustache dark and his hair nicely combed.



The tiny window through which the death ads are received.



The tiny window from inside the office in the RTA compound in Kabul.

And Mr. Zaki is also here, in the room, his beard white and down to his chest, his eyes tired.

In this room, time blurs, and history manifests as a series of isolated radio announcements to the nation. When Mr. Zaki tells the story, it is as if he has been waiting on that couch all these decades, fulfilled only when someone rushes in to bring him to the mic for another chapter.

“I was lying down here,” he began, describing a late night in 1979 when one Communist-backed president was killed and another took over, decrying his assassinated predecessor as “the child of American imperialism.”

A party official came and instructed Mr. Zaki to get behind the mic. “Announce that ‘the second round of the people’s democratic national revolution has succeeded,’” Mr. Zaki said, putting on his broadcast voice as he recalled the wording.

In the 1990s, he was here when the guerrilla factions came to power after the collapse of the Soviet-backed government and immediately started fighting each other. Some days, as many as 20 mortar shells landed at the station’s compound or nearby. One evening, one faction dragged him from the radio studio and put him in front of the TV cameras — they couldn’t find one of the usual anchors to read the 8 o’clock news.

“Whoever took control of this radio, they had the government — this is how important this radio was,” said Mr. Zaki, now 62.

And through all those years, people brought their death notices.

In the preparations after death, one of the first things families would do was task a literate member to draw up an announcement and pedal it to the station’s little window.

The format was always the same: listing all the male relatives, from closest relation to furthest, and — as if building suspense — ending the announcement with the name of the dead and the time and place of burial and memorial. But if the deceased was a woman, she did not get the dignity of her name — she was always the wife of so and so, the mother of so and so.

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The ads were an indication of status, too — the longer your announcement, the bigger your tribe. One ad had 125 names among the cousins alone, said Mr. Aziz, the clerk.

“If someone’s name was forgotten, they would argue with the family, ‘What was my crime that you left out my name? I am here helping with your funeral and memorial and my name is not in the ad,’ ” Mr. Aziz said.



Ziauddin Aziz with a sound engineer in the RTA radio recording studio.



The glass display with photos of about 300 “Beloved Anchors, from Yesterday to Today,” among them the young Mohamed Agha Zaki.

Each phase of conflict in Afghanistan has had its predominant cause of death. Once it was the indiscriminate mortar shells of the civil war fought over Kabul. More recently, it was suicide bombings. Old age, yes, that still appeared at times.

No matter the cause, the announcement format remained plain, the details of death edited out. But those behind the window knew.

“At night, if we heard in the news that in this part of Kabul there was a suicide bombing, we would come earlier the next morning knowing the ads would arrive for sure,” Mr. Aziz said.

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**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

There was an era when the “Death Advertisements” broadcast would frequently continue on for nearly double its hourlong slot, Mr. Aziz rushing dozens of times to the studio with the latest arrival. The live broadcast had to go on uninterrupted. Once the last death was read and people heard the concluding recitation of the Quranic prayer — “We belong to God, and to him we return” — the radios switched off. People moved about their lives.

Now, that all seems gone. It is not that people are not dying — it is that the program, and the radio itself, are.

One blow was the advent of Facebook and other social media, where notices are easily disseminated for free. Another was a fivefold rise in the price of ads per word, from one afghani to five, or about \$6.50 for every 100 words. Then came coronavirus, restricting movement and discouraging large gatherings. The deaths pile up in depressing number, just without the honor of a radio announcement.

One of the loudest death knells for the program was a physical barricade. The RTA compound and U.S. Embassy are side by side. Over the past decade, Kabul's diplomatic neighborhood has become so barricaded with blast walls and checkpoints that the public can barely get to the station anymore. About three years ago, the station was forced to relocate the little "Death Advertisements" window.

"The 'Department of Receiving Death Advertisements,' formerly adjacent to the U.S. Embassy, has shifted to the western side of Radio Television Afghanistan, its entrance now through Street 14," the radio repeatedly informed.

But people still lost their way. On many occasions, relatives of the dead arrived at the new location after the broadcast was over, having searched an hour for the new little window in the maze of blast walls and checkpoints.

These days, there is a different kind of regime change at the state broadcaster, Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA). A young director, brought in from the BBC, is trying to pull it into modern times. He's busy improving the television side's quality to HD, retraining journalists in new products, and trying to usher the old institution into a new era of drone cameras and slick mobile content.

"I am trying to rebrand RTA for the younger generation," Ismail Miakhail, the new director, said.



An RTA news broadcast in the TV recording studio which is housed in an auditorium in Kabul.



Ismail Miakhail, the new director general of RTA, in the TV studio.

Mr. Aziz, 42, still begins his mornings before the city wakes up, arriving on his scooter to pray the dawn prayer at 4 a.m. in the nearby mosque before pulling into the RTA to open shop. He makes about \$185 a month, overtime included.

Mostly, he opens and closes without any new entry on the ledger.

But for Mr. Zaki, who said he's ready when retirement comes, why not stick with the glory of the past? Time in these studios is a blur of triumph and tragedy anyway. What's wrong with adding a bit of denial?

"People still listen to the radio — in the rural areas, in the mountains, in the villages," Mr. Zaki said. "Because this is the language of the nation."



A cemetery in Kabul.