

Charcha with Omaid Sharifi, Art Lords, Kabul

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Inaugural edition of Charcha, Centre for Afghanistan Studies (CAS) online blog. Hima Bindu in conversation with Mr. Omaid Sharifi, founder of path-breaking initiative Art Lords, Kabul, Afghanistan. FEBRUARY 2017.





Illustration 1: I am watching you! Corrupt persons. Source: *Art Lords*

Why Art Lords? What was the inspiration and motivation behind Art Lords?

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a prison, so we wanted to bring down these walls and the easy way for us was to paint them. Putting colour on these walls was important for the eyes and a post– conflict society like ours. So that was the beginning. These walls are an open canvas for us because the walls are there, we can easily go and put up messages and paint them. This was the beginning for “I See You” campaign. Corruption is a big problem in the country, we are amongst the top most corrupt countries of the world. So we wanted to do something about that as well. The

We started Art Lords three years ago.

It’s a team of three people, we were thinking of having a social movement. The first thing that came to our mind was, we must find ways to bring down these big ugly concrete walls, as high as six meters which are built for protection from explosions. They block the roads, buildings covering up the beauty of the city. They are surrounding the educational institutions, government offices and embassies. Kabul looks like

famous message with a pair of eyes, that corruption is not hidden from god, resonated well with the citizens and the international community. It is gaining momentum and is everywhere .We have more than 100 such murals now. You will come across the Art Lord murals wherever you travel in Kabul. You can see messages about corruption, women's rights and other hopeful messages to keep the mind occupied with beautiful colours and images.

How is this movement empowering the people? What in your opinion has been its most pronounced impact?

There is certainly a lot of fear now in those who are corrupt. Because the moment they know these art murals out in the streets of Kabul. They are crossing these murals every single day. So I really believe they have a some sort of consciousness, and that it will bother them. If you are crossing by and you see these messages every single day, it goes deep down in your thoughts and heart that you are a corrupt person and you are stealing from a very, very poor country. Some of the murals we have really encourage critical thinking and in asking questions. For example, I have a mural where a daughter asks his father where did he find money to buy a new car? In Afghanistan we see that your friend becomes rich in a week or a month or this other guy buys a new car, it has become a new trend now. People must ask questions. Where did you find the money? People get a salary of US \$500 a month but they just bought a car worth US \$20,000. How is that possible? There's no loan scheme in Afghanistan. So at the end of the day what I am encouraging people to be, is critical thinkers, to ask questions and find a social balance and to put pressure on those corrupt people.

Afghanistan is not all about drugs, its not about terrorism or Taliban. Afghanistan is also about Art Lords and about constructive people who like art and music.

People love our work they join us. Every time we are on the streets of Kabul, we invite people to join us. From street kids to elderly people; drivers; ambassadors to ministers have come to paint with us. They have been a part of this movement; they are involved with this project. Its not just me now, it's the whole city which is in love with the murals and want to be a part of it.

Do you see a little hypocrisy from the government individuals being a part of your initiatives that advocate against corruption and women rights?

We are a poor country and are dependent on the aid we receive from the international community. We are receiving the money on the condition that we fight corruption. So the government officials need to show that they are fighting corruption even though they might be corrupt. We have lot of corrupt officials, but they have to show they are doing something about it. And one of the ways is to show is- ok- Art Lords is a famous brand in Afghanistan right now, so lets associate ourselves with Art Lords. I get calls from ministers and different government officials encouraging me to paint their walls to show they are also against corruption. There are also good people, I don't blame every single person in this government to be corrupt. There are people who have integrity, who are transparent and accountable. They also help us inn trying to get permission to paint walls.

What were the initial challenges and how did you overcome them?

The first thing that comes to your mind when working against corruption in Afghanistan is that you either have to be like them, which means you, have to become a corrupt person or when you are against them, there are serious threats of kidnapping, injury or even the risk of being killed. So when we started this movement three years ago, I got a call- ok its good movement for

awareness but if you take any names, then you are in severe danger. So there are threat calls every day! Even when I was painting in prominent locations in Kabul, the guard threatened to shoot me if I didn't move. These are things that we have faced in Kabul. Apart from that, we are working at the presidential palace, at the US embassy and spy agencies. These are prominent locations and there's a threat of explosions, suicide attacks and it could happen to you because you are standing on the streets. But at the end of the day, this is our country and we are here to make a difference. We consciously decided to go on the streets, its not something we didn't know about. We know all challenges and we are planning ways to minimize the dangers and threats but at the end of the day we have to be careful, if we are not, it becomes very easy for the dark forces to enter. I sometimes change my appearance, I drive one day, I take my bicycle the second day, and taxi another. I change my timings every single day. I try everything possible in my power to be safe and keep my team safe. Sometimes things happen, that we don't anticipate.

People come to streets and see beautiful young girls, coming to streets to paint. They are climbing the ladders and doing all that men can do. This is breaking the taboo.

Could you tell us more about your 'heroes of the city' theme and its effects?

The message is simple. We started with our own resources we saw an opportunity in those ugly blast walls and we started to paint them. And now it's Art Lords, its everywhere. This I hope serves as a success message for young groups in Afghanistan. And this is important to show a different face of Afghanistan to the international community. Afghanistan is not all about

drugs, its not about terrorism or Taliban. Afghanistan is also about Art Lords and about constructive people who like art and music.

Why does 'Art Lords' not accept any donations? How do you fund your work?

We have not taken any money from the government; we are very reluctant to accept it. We have to be very careful, when we started Art Lords; we used our money and resources. We went a long way with that. We do receive small donations here and there. We are now at a stage where we have an office, a gallery, twenty--five people working for me, we have a financial management system, which is sound and transparent. So we are now open to getting commissions, because I have many people to pay salaries. We have many volunteers but also people whose families depend on their salaries. We have not received any government money. People come to us saying they will fund the entire campaign, but I say NO. The international community is also supporting us in different ways.



Illustration 2: It's my time to study. Not to get married. Say no to child marriage. Source: Art Lords.

How is 'Art Lords' changing the perception of people about issues surrounding women, and are you positive it will bridge the gap between the sexes?

I salute women! All women! They have gone through so much. They have felt the harassment, the patriarchal bias. Last few years, there have been significant changes, women are coming out and standing up for their own rights and most importantly what I have seen is that the men of Afghanistan stand up for their sisters, mothers, wives. First thing for us at Art Lords is, the team. Art Lords is not just made for boys, there are a lot of girls, they come in and join us. That is a big change in the eyes of 5 million people living in Kabul. People come to streets and see beautiful young girls, coming to streets to paint. They are climbing the ladders and doing all that men can do. This is breaking the taboo. We are encouraging a lot of women to be artists and in coming to the streets and show their talent.



Illustration 3: What happened to your promise, your vows, your intentions? Source: Art Lords

I love my work. It is exciting despite all the challenges and the threats we face. We lose our friends and dear ones in attacks and explosions. Despite all the sorrow, this work gives me hope. It has made me think of the bigger picture and helped me to be a better person, to be more kind and encouraging; to be empathetic and compassionate.



Source: Art Lords