

13. Afghanistan: Navigating between enemies and restrictive forces

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Media in Afghanistan have had their successes and failures since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in the late months of 2001. We have seen progress, but now we are also in danger of slipping back from the achievements we have made. More than 100 national and international journalists and media workers have lost their lives in Afghanistan since 2001 and more than 1,300 cases of violence, against media and freedom of expression, have been reported since 2001.

On the other hand, when one compares Afghan media with those of neighbouring countries, Afghanistan has the most independent and free media situation in the region. There are 483 operational media outlets, including 96 TV stations, 190 radio stations, and 197 newspapers across the country. If we rely on the facts published by the Afghanistan Media Directory (Nai, 2017), about 12,000 journalists and media workers are involved in the Afghan media sector. Out of this, in accordance with Center for Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ)¹, approximately 18-20 per cent are women.

The new era of media development in Afghanistan is short, less than two decades. Despite this fact, the media have developed magically in this period. There were no TV stations during the Taliban period (1996–2001); only one radio station was operating with non-stop Taliban propaganda, and only a few government newspapers were published, equally propagandistic.

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Media encouragement

Media in Afghanistan are responsible for developments in a variety of sectors. There are over seven million female students in the country, and one of the reasons for a high enrolment is the fact that the media convinced families to send their girls to school. A survey conducted by Altai Consultancy in 2016 showed that most of the population receives its information from radio and TV, including information on their rights, and indeed, their children's rights to study. More than six million Afghans cast their votes during the last presidential election in 2014, not least because the media encouraged the public to use their rights, despite the security challenges. IEC, the Independent Election Commission, Afghanistan's election management body, in 2015 announced their survey results. These showed that most of the election-related information the public received was through the media. It may indicate that the majority of the population made their decision to cast votes because they have been encouraged to do by stories in the media. In the recent 2018 Afghanistan parliamentary elections, according to the election management body, IEC, about nine million eligible voters were registered and the reason given was that the media had informed them of their civil responsibilities. Afghanistan's citizens, especially urban ones, mount protests against policies and even sometimes against some government actions if they think these policies and actions fail to correspond to their rights as granted to them in the constitution.

Twenty years ago, protesting against government action was a dream, or rather a nightmare, because such protests were defined as both sinful and criminal. How can it be, then, that people protest now? The answer lies in the fact that the media made public important parts of dominant discourses, and emphasized the citizens' rights. These examples are just some of many more results of free media performance and its results in Afghanistan. It is also worth mentioning that most of the public moves are being managed through social and mainstream media. In November 2018, the central government arrested a local police chief who was renowned for fighting with the Taliban in Wardak province near Kabul. On the evening of his arrest, groups of people in Kabul started to call for gatherings and protests, especially through social media. Next day at one o'clock in the morning, more than three thousand people gathered in Kabul and by 9 am the same day, the man, Ali, was released.

Furthermore, Afghanistan has one of the best media laws in the region. According to the rating made by the Center for Law and Democracy (CLD), a Canadian NGO working to promote and protect democracy, the law concerning access to information in Afghanistan is the best law in the world (CLD, 2018). Afghanistan has a Media Establishment and Performance Regulation legislation, while these two salient legal documents do not exist in neighbouring countries. To compare, in Iran there is no private media through the law, in China, there is no freedom of expression. In five central Asia “-stans” – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan – the situation of freedom of expression is worse than Afghanistan, because either they do not have a direct law guarantee for freedom of expression, or the practice is more difficult than it is in Afghanistan. According to Freedom House, the score of Afghanistan is better than all the aforementioned countries (Freedom House, 2017). In Pakistan and India, such processes are more bureaucratic, either for access to information or for establishing a media outlet, facts which makes a free flow of information and media establishment time-consuming processes. Comparing Afghanistan’s use frequency² (based on Afghan Mass Media Law) with Pakistan’s related legal document³, one sees how difficult it is to establish a radio in Pakistan, while it shows how easy it is in Afghanistan. Comparisons show that Afghanistan’s mass media law is better than most related laws in the neighbouring countries.

Despite all of the above-mentioned achievements, Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. The situation for journalists has caused many international observers to hold mistaken perceptions of media freedom of Afghanistan. Freedom House, for example shows Afghanistan as “not free” in the media sector (Freedom House, 2018). Reporters Without Borders, (RSF) recognizes Afghanistan as dangerous for media as its reporters are fleeing due to the danger they are facing. In their report for 2018, Afghanistan is ranked 118th out of 180 countries (RSF, 2016). We do believe the media are *partly* free in Afghanistan but we also recognize the fact that journalists face many difficulties in this country. RSF is not the only international entity describing Afghanistan as a dangerous place for the media. Citizens and the whole journalist community is badly affected.

If we look at the recent 18 years, in which the media has largely been a success story in Afghanistan, there are very clear instances, which have arisen since 2014 indicating the media situation is rapidly becoming worse. In the four years from 2014 to end of 2018, more than 50 journalists and media workers have been killed, while in the twelve-year period from 2001 to the end of 2013, fewer than 50 were killed. The current national unity government took office in 2014.

Deaths and violence

In 2018 alone, 18 journalists and media workers were killed in Afghanistan. The number of casualties is differently reported by other organizations and mainly has been estimated as lower than what is indicated here. The main cause of this difference is that here in Afghanistan, not only journalists, but all media workers are reported. The other organizations seem to count only journalists/reporters, a fact which seems unjust since in several cases, media *institutions* are targeted. During 2017, Afghanistan recorded more than 150 cases of violence against journalists. According to Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan (hereafter called Nai); about 1,300 cases of violence against journalists have been recorded in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in November 2001.⁴

In January 2016, the Taliban, the biggest enemy of the media in the country, announced it was targeting specific media outlets, which had reported on their activities during the fall of Kunduz, one of the Northern provinces in the country. Kunduz remained under their control for almost three days. Consequently, they targeted the staff of one of the biggest media companies, Moby Group.⁵ They killed seven media staff and wounded 26 other employees. *Tolo TV*, owned by Moby Group had reported on Taliban crimes during the Taliban seizure of Kunduz. This included the burning of local markets, and raping female students at the Kunduz University dormitory. According to *Tolo TV*, during their control of Kunduz, the Taliban looted a market in the city, killed tens of innocent citizens, justifying this act by accusing them of having links with the government. This media exposure of the Taliban's crimes, especially the rape story, led the Taliban to designate media institutions as military targets. The consequence was the brutal attack on the Moby Group bus. Recently, in June 2018, a Taliban mobile radio

in Ghazni Province, which was one of their propaganda organs used to recruit youth into their ranks, was bombed and destroyed. After the incident, spokesperson for Taliban, Zabihullah Mujahid, wrote in a Twitter post as well as through an email to all the media, that because the government bombed and demolished their radio, the Taliban will not respect any media outlets and organizations, but will attack them (Nai, 2018).

According to Nai's recorded information, most of the journalists and media workers killed since 2001 (of them, 17 foreigners), have been killed either by direct and/or indirect involvement of the Taliban or ISIS.⁶

However, it is not just the Taliban, which threatens and violates the rights of journalists. Based on Nai's recorded data, the only systematic recorded data on violence against journalists since 2001, the Government of Afghanistan is behind more than 60 per cent of the cases of violence, excluding killings. In most of the cases, there has been full impunity: authorities have not persecuted or brought to justice persons behind the violence. This has been the case even if (or perhaps because) the person behind the violence was a staff member from one of the governmental entities. This high number of violent cases has become a strong point of criticism of the government for not supporting freedom of speech and free media, despite the existing legislation. It is worth mentioning that since the beginning of 2017, violent cases against journalists recorded by media support organizations including Nai have been reviewed by a committee, the Joint Committee of Government and Media. Almost 40 cases since 2001 have been reviewed and 49 others are under process. However, none of the cases committed by government personnel are reviewed.

Alongside the government, there are local powers, oftentimes called warlords, who are threatening journalists and the media in general. One illustrative case is when Mr. Nadim Ghori, editor-in-chief of *Sam* monthly and owner of a private historical museum based in Firozkoh (capital of the central Ghor province), was threatened by such local powers; his office was broken into and robbed in June 2018.⁷ Local powerful people are always somehow connected with the government, either as government officials themselves, or by having connections with high-ranking officials.

Government failing to protect journalists

Furthermore, the government of Afghanistan has failed to prevent threats against the media from the Taliban and other terrorist groups. This has decreased the media sector's trust in the government, since according to Chapter 2, Article 34 of the Afghanistan Constitution, the Afghan government is obliged to support freedom of expression and a free media.⁸

There are several reasons for this lack of support for media from the government of Afghanistan: One is countrywide corruption in governmental institutions; another is the existence of extremists and Taliban supporters at different levels of the government. An obvious example is the Upper House spokesperson, who was a staff member of the Taliban's religious police during their government (1996–2001). A third reason could be remnants from the old communist regime, which ruled during, and for some years after, the Soviet occupation (occupation 1979–1988, supported government until 1992), an example being the president's ex national security advisor who recently resigned, but who was working in the attorney's department, in intelligence service, during that span of time. In addition, one of the obvious reasons could be the improvement of the media and their critique of government failures or bad performance. Thus, the government, not the structures and policies, but rather its staff and employees, somehow see the media as their enemy. In many instances, government staff ignore attacks on the media and do not condemn them. Despite this ignorance, media literacy is increasing gradually among Afghan citizens. Furthermore, the media have their obligation to make the government accountable through criticism, if necessary, and a responsibility to speak out to remind them of both obligations and promises. Upholding this role of the media has been an ongoing struggle between the media and the government for more than a decade.

Moreover, both the threats from the Taliban and other terrorist groups as well as government action or inaction have led to considerable self-censorship in the media sector in Afghanistan. This self-censorship is of course further encouraged by the Taliban, who see it as their task to exert pressure on the free media. During their period in power, they demonstrated that they do not believe in human rights or any related human values. However, trying to understand why Afghan

governments in the period after 2001 have behaved in an oppressive way is more challenging, especially when it comes to the National Unity Government of Afghanistan, which has been in office since late in 2014.

Prior to running for office, the National Unity government leaders submitted a signed letter to Nai and some other media; this letter supported organizations and assured us of their support for freedom of expression and a free media. Nevertheless, they have failed to secure the environment for the media to perform their duties and improve their work. The main example of the government not being able or willing to protect the media, appeared during the bloody attack by the Taliban on the Moby Group's staff, mentioned above, despite the fact that there had been prior threats from the Taliban against *Tolo* TV, one of the branches of Moby Group.

After the Taliban's explicit threats to target certain media outlets, and specifically after the January 20, 2016 attack on the Moby Group staff, media organizations started to set up meetings with the related government organizations, including the Presidential Office and security offices of the government, including the Ministries of Interior and Defence. These meetings were to discuss how to secure media and journalists and protect them from any likely attacks.

In the beginning, government officials seemed eager to receive media suggestions in this regard, but by the end of these meetings, they were resolved to bring forward their own thoughts on how to secure media, instead of listening to ideas from those of us who were media representatives. This happened because the media representatives admitted they were not experts on security, the military or safety; as such, they argued that this was the government's responsibility. Thus, the government used their own experts to find the best way to try to make the environment safe and secure. Despite those efforts, the environment is still not safe, and violence against journalists increases. In April 2018, a group of journalists and photographers who were covering a suicide attack in the Green Zone of Shashdarak in Kabul city were themselves attacked. Nine journalists were killed and six others seriously injured. ISIS claimed responsibility of this very bloody attack on the reporters.

Although the government did not protect the media community, meetings and negotiations with government bodies continued. These

meetings resulted in the establishment of a committee composed of members from government and the media, which was to meet regularly and discuss any challenges in this regard. The committee was named “Media and Government Joint Committee” and has local representative committees in every province in Afghanistan.⁹ In addition, under the National Directorate of Security (NDS), a group was tasked to review all threats and coordinate the information with specific targeted/threatened media outlets, media staff and media organizations. The NDS group has a representative at the joint committee and is in contact with media outlets and organizations. But it is sometimes confusing whether the threats about which NDS releases to media outlets and organizations is actual security information about threats against the media, or whether such “threats” have been created by government to pressurize media to soften its critique and become increasingly intimidated.

Moreover, the Ministry of Information and Culture (MoIC) of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has also started to cooperate with media organizations and outlets aimed at facilitating meetings and sessions with government other officials.

Self-censorship in several directions

At this stage, it seems as if the government of Afghanistan is trying to show a robust level of support for the media. There is continuous contact between the government and the media sector, mainly to discuss safety and security issues. In some instances, media managers are warned that they are under threat and the government issues some recommendations for developing measures for physical security. After most of the warnings, media managers and journalists usually prepare the environment to make the situation as safe as possible for their outlets and themselves. Unfortunately, focusing on security sometimes causes them to forget why they are journalists and what they ought to be doing as professional journalists. Consequently, one of the main obligations of the media – to criticize the government to make sure it upholds its legal obligations and promises – is currently being forgotten. Almost all media outlet owners and top journalists think that the government is now close with the media and that criticizing government actions will only damage this collaborative atmosphere.

It is worth mentioning that although media owners and managers have different socio-political leanings, the circumstances have affected them all. In other words, pro-government, pro-opposition and independent media are all affected equally by the current situation. In a study based partly on interviews with 28 active journalists in five regions of Afghanistan, a clear majority (24) reported that they had faced violence in relation to their work during the previous five years, and had been in situations where their safety had been threatened. Only four answered that they had suffered no violence, three reported one occasion, 11 reported between 2–5 occasions, three reported between 5–10 incidents, while seven reported more than ten (Eide et al. 2019). Furthermore, according to research conducted by Saumava Mitra in 2017, cases of violence against journalists are increasing both qualitatively and quantitatively. Moreover, violence has not only become heavier qualitatively, but the number of instances of violence against journalists increased (Mitra, 2017).

The fact that the increasing level of violence against the media has been followed by inaction by government bodies, and hence ascribing impunity to the perpetrators of violence, has led to self-censorship arising in a new and different way. “Violent incidents against journalists almost always go unpunished. This impunity is fuelling widespread self-censorship” (Blomquist, 2018). According to Human Rights Watch, intimidations contributed to Afghan journalists’ self-censorship (HRW, 2015).

A good and a broad example in this regard could be the silence of Afghan media toward the peace and reconciliation process talks that are now proceeding through quadripartite meetings between the United States, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan to draw a road map for reconciliation and peace in Afghanistan. There has not been a single word about guaranteeing freedom of expression and free media in Afghanistan during these talks. It is worth mentioning that in the same negotiation processes in the past there had been some acquiescence from the Taliban. The Taliban also suggested that it was willing to soften its stance on some issues to facilitate a peace process. It said it was willing to accept a government system that “gives the right of education for women and men” and allows “freedom of expression” (Raghavan, 2015). However, this time not only did Taliban not raise the

issue, but even other media failed to comment, because they do not want to damage the existing atmosphere of relations with the government.

Furthermore, in a statement, The Afghan High Peace Council, the entity that facilitates negotiations between the Afghan government and armed groups of the opposition, said that Afghan media should not de-stabilize the peace and reconciliation processes by reporting on them, unless the council officially announces something. Furthermore, a ceasefire with the Taliban during the days of the Ramadan Eid, in June 2018, caused the media to refrain from criticizing the Taliban. It is believed that during the ceasefire, thousands of Taliban members came to the cities and half of them have not returned to their own areas, thus representing potential threats against those who oppose the, including the media, especially in Kabul.

A glance at Afghan media and their coverage of the National Unity Government, compared to its attitude towards previous governments since 2001, shows that the trend of the media openly criticizing the government has decreased. This happens despite the rising level of corruption; despite the fact that the security situation has declined and the economic and political situation in Afghanistan is worse than at any time since 2001. Moreover, due to the rising level of corruption, the governmental attitude towards the media has changed. Some individuals at the government level clearly see the media as their enemy. The government has some unprofessional and obscure connections with some media managers and owners, which enables the government indirectly to influence some of the media's programs and content.

This self-censorship in relation to government is combined with self-censorship due to Taliban threats. The main subjects omitted in such processes of self-censorship are Taliban activities, including the killing of citizens, among them women, burning local houses and facilities. This self-censorship not only occurs in rural areas, where these extremists exercise much control; it also takes place everywhere, even in the big cities, including the capital Kabul. If it continues, it is possible that the media may be changed into a silent sector, which always thinks about its own safety and security, but does not pay justice to its ideals, its *raison d'être*.

If this trend is not opposed, Afghanistan will lose one of the miracles in its modern history. It will lose the freedom of expression and free

media, which have been the result of the direct sacrifice of the lives of almost one hundred journalists and media workers. Furthermore, it will put at risk the lives of thousands of media staff members, not to mention the results of tens of millions of dollars of the international community's taxpayer money granted to build an independent media situation in Afghanistan.

Still hope

I do believe that there is still room to support Afghanistan's freedom of expression and free media. Afghanistan media still needs to prioritize more skill building programs through which their confidence as a sector can grow once again. There is need for the international community to re-allocate financial support to media capacity building. The trainings should range from beat reporting and analyses to investigative reporting.

There is a need for Afghanistan as well as for international allies of Afghanistan to re-announce their commitment of support for human right values, including the right to freedom of expression. Media in Afghanistan need to be reminded that critique of governments and of powerful institutions is one of the main duties of free media worldwide.

I do believe that Afghanistan media does have the capacity to learn more and increase its watchdog functions of powerful people and institutions in our war-torn and corrupted country. Nevertheless, it needs a powerful commitment of international institutions in that they support the sector in order to keep those in power on their toes and accountable to the population.

I also believe that it is for the international community to remind the Afghanistan government to uphold its international commitment and its promises laid out in international laws, including the Human Rights Declaration and Citizen Civil and Political Rights Convention, and all laws guaranteeing press freedom and unhampered access to information.

Notes

1. <http://www.cpawj.org/en/>
2. <http://atra.gov.af/en/page/6912/6935/6936>
3. <http://www.pemra.gov.pk/>
4. Please see: <https://nai.org.af/data-maps/>

5. <http://www.mobygroup.com>
6. Please see: <https://nai.org.af/data-maps/>
7. <http://nai.org.af/files/documents/mw/Monthly%20Report%20157%20English.pdf>
8. <https://www.mfa.gov.af/constitution/chapter-two-fundamental-rights-and-du-ties-of-citizen.html>
9. This author is a member of Kabul media and government joint committee.

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