



**TRUTH IN A TIME OF CONTAGION:
THE VIRAL FRONTLINE**
AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY REPORT

AFGHANISTAN INSECURITY AND UNCERTAINTY: THE STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

Direct attacks, deteriorating security and a dire economic situation, coupled with lack of access to information left Afghanistan's media frustrated and exposed in a year that was one of the industry's most violent and taxing.

The continuing targeted killings of Afghan journalists continued to have a dire impact on the country's vulnerable industry amid a year of pandemic and chaos.

According to journalists' rights organisations in Afghanistan, the series of targeted violence and assassinations that plagued the industry increased after the US-Taliban peace agreement was signed in early 2020. Assassinations of journalists, civil society activists and religious leaders spiked. In addition to ISIS, the Taliban also stood accused of targeted media assassinations. The Taliban denied the allegations, but the Afghan government argued there was ample evidence to show that the Taliban were involved in the most targeted assassinations of the period.

Meaningful peace has continued to elude the Afghan people over the past two decades. Likewise, the situation for media has been tumultuous, as the challenges and the struggles of the period have gone from great hope to fear and frustration while international funds and resources that once propped up the industry slowly dry up.

In 2020, while the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government began with promise, it was a short lived dream. The imminent US withdrawal and its implications for media must be considered – particularly in a year where women journalists were forced from the industry in droves.

NO PEACE, NO SECURITY

A country once bereft of information, now has an abundance of media and alternative news sources – which Afghans look to not only for information but also to form their views of the world. Today, around 6.5 million Afghans are active social media users, and more than 100 newspapers and 170 radio stations serve the Afghan population.

However, the Afghan media's progressive development, its efforts to gain the trust of the people and its struggle against corruption and insecurity sadly still remain unacceptable to the Taliban, members of government and the ruling parties in general. Consequently, both directly and indirectly these forces try to silence the voices of freedom of speech and threaten the efforts and lives of those working in the media.

The Taliban, who ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, still want a return to power. But the government of Ashraf Ghani is holding on – albeit tenuously amid the withdrawal of all US and NATO troops. The countdown is now on, with US President Joe Biden announcing all troops will be out by September 11, 2021.

Analysts say that following the signing of the agreement between the United States and the Taliban, the security situation in different provinces of the country notably deteriorated – and the media state of health declined with it. From May 2020 to April 2021,

in the country, 20 were wounded, some were imprisoned, at least 100 resigned from the industry and 50 were forced to flee beyond its borders. Such violence and a declining security situation represent a serious counter threat to the achievements of the last two decades in the field of freedom of expression and a free press in Afghanistan.

In the IFJ's annual killed report for 2020, Afghanistan was the second deadliest country in the world with 10 killings in the year – most of them in targeted explosions or direct shooting attacks.

In addition to physical insecurity, the media faces an immense challenge in maintaining its independence. According to the Kabul Press Club, the government works directly with those media outlets who toe its line. The club has strongly urged the government under Ashraf Ghani to prevent serial assassinations of journalists and at one point called upon the media to boycott government news for three days. In response, the government issued a statement declaring that though the Kabul Press Club is registered with the Afghan government, its work was 'anti-government'. The presidency and the National Directorate Security (NDS) pressured the Kabul Press Club's administrative board to withdraw its published statement. The club says that such a strong reaction by the government and its pressure on institutions that defend and support journalists shows its negative attitude to the media and media independence.

COVID CLOSES DOWN ON EXPRESSION

The outbreak of Covid-19 hit the Afghan media and professional journalists hard, according to IFJ affiliate, the Afghan Independent Journalist Association (AIJA).

A survey by AIJA in the period found that 19 media outlets were shut down in 11 provinces, around 64 journalists lost their jobs, and scores of journalists had their salaries reduced or not paid at all. The closure of the media outlets was coupled a continuation of murders and assassinations even in spite of pandemic conditions, it said.

Out of 19 media outlets, 10 radio stations located in Jawzjan, Baghlan, Parwan, Logar, Badakhshan, Blak and Kudzus provinces were shut down amid the pandemic, and one television station in Baghlan. Two weeklies in Kandahar and Takhar provinces, one newspaper in Ghor, one magazine in Herat and five print media outlets in Badakhshan were also closed.

AIJA says some journalists left their jobs or resigned at the request of the media outlet. Dozens of employees of TV stations in Kandahar lost their jobs. The association is continuing to monitor the situation and assess the damage and changes to the media landscape.

"In Khost province, Gharghast local TV station has currently only one employee," said AIJA's vice president, Hujatullah Mujadidi. "Without the employees, the TV station will but shut. Also, in Samangan province, Radio Milma terminated the contract with its field staff due to the Covid 19 crisis."

But there were a few bright spots. In Samangan province, broadcasts from the two local television stations, Shahrvand and Rostam, were temporarily suspended, but are now active again, he said.

AIJA said reductions in salaries impacted journalists across the board with a large number of media workers not receiving salaries for months. Journalists in 11

ALTHOUGH THE TALIBAN HAS NOT FORMALLY DECLARED ITS HOSTILITY TO REPORTERS, IN ITS UNOFFICIAL COMMENTS IT REFERS TO REPORTERS AS “SLAVES AND MERCENARIES OF THE WEST” AND THE GOVERNMENT.

provinces had filed complaints over reduction of their salaries and sometimes receiving no salaries at all in the period. In Panjshir province, a number of journalists had not received salaries for as long as two years, according to AIJA communications. In other regional and remote areas, dozens of employees in local media outlets continue to work voluntarily.

EXTREMIST THREATS

Aside from wage challenges of the period, the armed Taliban and the Daesh or Islamic State (IS) are still the primary threat. Journalists who have been displaced from Helmand, Ghor, Ghazni and Kunduz provinces also say that they received official and unofficial threats from the Taliban via telephone, WhatsApp and through family members.

Asadullah (name changed) was displaced from his province and was forced to move to the capital, Kabul, after he was issued death threats by Taliban supporters. He said that the Taliban consider journalists' work anti-Islam and call them 'mercenaries'. Their work is labelled as illegal, and they are accused of working for infidel countries. In addition, the Daesh has also openly declared its hostility to journalists. The most horrifying instance of this in recent times was the killing of three female journalists in Jalalabad in Nangarhar province in March 2021.

Although the Taliban has not formally declared its hostility to reporters, in its unofficial comments it refers to reporters as “slaves and mercenaries of the West” and the government. Some activists and low-ranking members have threatened reporters and sent messages of happiness to each other after the killing of a journalist. For instance, when Azadi Radio correspondent Elyas Dae was killed in an explosion in Helmand on November 12, 2020, Taliban supporters celebrated on social media that the reporter was “punished”.

“After the last months of 2020, the security and working conditions of journalists have deteriorated,” said Mujib Khalwatgar, head of Afghan media advocacy group Nai. “About ten active journalists and two journalists who have already resigned have been killed and 20 others have been injured, and a total of 130 incidents of violence against journalists have been registered, which is a 30 percent increase over last year”.

In 2020, not only were journalists targeted, but their families too were hounded.

According to Khalwatgar, the Taliban and other extremist groups are responsible for most of these incidents, but the government and more powerful groups close to the government were also responsible for silencing journalists and prioritising their own vested interests. The lack of investigation of cases of attacks on journalists increases impunity and encourages further attacks.

Although the government and media rights organisations hold the Taliban responsible for many assassinations

and violence directed at the media, the Taliban issued a statement on January 6, 2021, condemning the attacks on journalists and denying responsibility from their side. The Taliban have earlier claimed responsibility for the assassination of Afghan government intelligence agents and anti-peace groups and individuals.

Not convinced by this denial, and the increasing fear and intimidation, Human Rights Watch said in a statement on April 1, 2021, that the Taliban had stepped up attacks to intimidate media workers, journalists and civil society activists. The statement called on the Taliban to stop the violence against journalists as soon as possible and not to obstruct the media, press and freedom of speech.

Media rights activists say that if the enemies of freedom of speech are allowed to roam free and the international community does not intervene or pressurise the government and armed groups, the media cannot progress.

CHANGING THE RULES ON MEDIA

Challenges for media were also evident in actions emanating from the ruling government in the period as it sought to make changes to hard won media laws. In June 2020, Afghan media companies unilaterally rejected proposed changes to a media law that they say would be a setback for independent journalism in the country.

Amendments to the legislation were sent to parliament for ratification, but later recalled by the government for further review after the outcry from media outlets and rights defenders. Among the proposal was a measure that would require journalists to reveal their sources to government bodies, including the security services.

While the government and its spokespeople continue to give strong verbal commitments to media freedom and the struggle against impunity, it beggars belief that they would introduce a proposal with little to no consultation with the media and troubled journalists who fear that press freedom is also under attack in the war-ravaged country. Nevertheless, as the furore broke out, a presidential spokesperson confirmed that “the government started a consultation process with all media outlets for any possible future amendments,” adding that Afghanistan enjoys a “free and vibrant media.”

“We were surprised to learn the government has almost discreetly amended the media law with some quite shocking amendments,” said Lotfullah Najafizada, director of TOLONews, Afghanistan's largest private television station in an interview at the time. “Freedom of expression has transformed Afghanistan in two decades and any setback is a grave mistake.”

“There are many forces in Afghanistan and outside who wish to curb free media and access to information in our country, but we certainly did not expect the government to be a frontrunner in this league,” he said.

NO TRANSPARENCY

Despite an Access to Information Law passed in 2014 and amended in 2018, access to information continues to be heavily restricted.

In an attempt to ease access to information, an independent Information Access Commission has also been established. The commission set up 65 government-level departments to assist in the transfer of information from government offices to the media. But despite the law, accessing information is still mired in obstacles and challenges. It seems access to information has become a mere slogan in the country, as journalists are still being blocked from investigating critical issues.

In a contradictory move to the developments outlined, in 2020 the government actually imposed further restrictions on provincial spokespersons so that government spokespersons could no longer share information with the media, only governors now have this role. Since governors do not have much time to share information with the media, access to information has been automatically further restricted.

The main hurdles in access to information for the country are in the institutions of security, justice and peace, which do not readily share any information with the media. This prevents from sharing accurate information, thus affecting the credibility of their reporting.

One example of the lack of access to information is that of Hazrat Mohammad Rohani, a correspondent with Killid Radio in Helmand. The reporter filed several complaints last year with journalists' rights organisations and the Kabul Press Club after the governor of Helmand agreed to a mere three-minute interview after 23 days of efforts and requests by the journalist.

WOMEN JOURNALISTS TARGETED

In 2020, reports began filtering out of Afghanistan that over 300 Afghan female journalists had quit their jobs in recent months due to security concerns. A Center for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalist (CPAWJ) investigation found 20 per cent of women journalists lost their jobs in the period. AIJA also said only 60 of these women journalists have been hired back.

Afghanistan is not an easy country for working women, particularly those employed in the media. Patriarchy is deeply entrenched and women in the media often work in tight-knit communities, either on the same shifts or in women-only newsrooms. They work together and they travel together. Zan TV, Afghanistan's first all-female station employs about 50 people, all women in their 20s. But a situation that is hoped to bring women safety, can also make them vulnerable.

In Jalalabad in Nangarhar province on March 2, 2021, Mursal Wahidi, 25, Sadia Sadat, 20, and Shahnaz Raofi, 20, were shot and killed in two separate attacks as they made their way home. All worked in a department that records voice-overs for foreign programs at Jalalabad television station Enikass. Their jobs were not the threat, their gender was. Ekinass had earlier informed Afghanistan's national intelligence agency about threats to its staff but had no information of threats directed at particular employees. A few days later, the radio station said they could not

hire any women due to the dire security situation.

Just a few months earlier, on December 10, 2020, Malala Maiwand, a female TV anchor for Enikass TV and Radio, had also killed by gunmen in Nangarhar. The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the shooting, terming her a "pro-regime" journalist.

Journalists' rights organisations say the attacks on women journalists in the period have been unprecedented.

"When they want to silence the press, they choose women journalists," said Nazish, from the Coalition for Women in Journalism. "Since their families are not particularly approving this", she says, "there is a lot of mental torture."

According to Zainullah Stanikzai, a member of the board of the Kabul Press Club, "We did not see such barbaric attacks on female reporters last year. The terrorists have shown by their actions that they have no mercy on anyone."

Farida Nikzad, chair of the Committee to Protect Women Journalists, Afghanistan (CPWJ), said that 2020 was the bloodiest year for journalists. Four female journalists were killed in Nangarhar province alone last year alongside five male reporters – a figure proportionately higher than the rest of the region in terms of journalist killings. Dozens of women journalists resigned and about ten have taken refuge in Kabul for security reasons. Nikzad said the threats from the Taliban are increasing the fear, while the government is still yet to take any security measures to specifically help or support women journalists.

Since the pandemic hit, the majority of female journalists now remain at home and have no jobs and no prospects for the future, according to AIJA. With support from the CPWJ, however, it says about 60 per cent of the female journalists have resumed their work with some media outlets in exchange for low or no salary. But no salary is hardly a sustainable future prospect and one that must be urgently addressed.

INSECURITY AMID IMPUNITY

Hopes for the advancement of freedom of speech and press freedom are not very high, with the government not fulfilling its obligation to ensure the safety of the journalists to the media's expectation. Still, at least the country has some record for investigating crimes against journalists – which puts it ahead of most countries in the region which largely have failed to even locate killers let alone ensure justice is delivered.

When Malala Maiwand was killed on December 20, 2020, two people accused of killing her were arrested two days later, according to Afghan government officials. Also, according to an Afghan government official, when journalist Elyas Dae was assassinated on November 12, 2020, a week later, the government arrested a man it accused of killing Dae. The same day when three employees of Enikass TV (Shazia Roufi, Saadia Sadat and Morsal Wahedi) were killed, the Afghan government announced that it had arrested a member of the ISIS group in connection with the killings. Whether they got the right people or killers is yet to be determined.

"Last year, prominent Afghan figures were ousted due to a wave of insecurity, journalists were killed, and civil society activists were hunted down by terrorists," said Interior Ministry spokesman, Tariq Arian.

Ahmad Qureshi, head of the Afghanistan Center for

Journalists, said that the numbers of targeted assassinations of journalists had increased in the past year. According to Qureshi, 119 journalists were injured during this period, and dozens of incidents of violence against journalists were reported, in which the Afghan government, the Taliban, ISIS, and other powerful people were involved.

He said the situation is still complicated, the incidents are not properly investigated and there is an ambiguity around the perpetrators, so it is difficult to judge which group is involved. The current situation has reached a point where the Afghan media is lagging behind instead of making progress, he said. Journalists do not dare to find out the real facts and are often forced to leave journalism for a safer and more secure existence.

The majority of journalists continue to censor themselves and act cautiously. With Covid-19, many reporters have not been out of their homes for as long as five months and many others have relocated to other places.

The families of journalists who have lost their loved ones blame the government for the current parlous situation for the media, saying that it is the government's responsibility to ensure journalists' safety. When a journalist is killed or threatened, thorough investigation and punishment to the perpetrators is critical.

Mudasir Dawat, the brother of Elyas Daee, a journalist killed in Helmand, said that the government had not conducted a satisfactory investigation into his murder. The Taliban did not claim responsibility, leaving the family in the dark about the reason for his killing. Dawat said his brother had been threatened by the armed Taliban and militants for the past 12 years, but the government failed to take any action to address the issue and his employer, Azadi Radio had also failed to provide adequate security measures.

"My brother was killed when he went to three government offices in his car for an interview the day before his death. These offices are located in the middle of the city near our house. His car was at home overnight. When he went up and went a hundred meters away from our house in the morning, there was an explosion," he said.

Dawat added that the government had not given them a satisfactory resolution, and that there was still no clear and convincing evidence against the person who had been arrested.

The incident puts a cloud of doubt over the adequacy of the investigation processes in the country and the capabilities of the government to communicate critical information to the families of victims.

NO GIVING UP

While it was a dangerous year for the media and journalists, some progress should be noted. The number of local media outlets grew and alongside, Afghan journalists and media workers, committed to freedom of the press and took measures to enhance their professional skills.

With financial support from Internews and the efforts of the Committee to Protect Women Journalists in Afghanistan, a seven-month leadership and technical training program was launched for dozens of women journalists in 2020.

Farida Nikzad says that a large number of women journalists now work at leadership levels in various offices after receiving practical training and are now taking on responsibilities in the technical and

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professional sectors. This is one of the most important achievements over the period under review and displays great courage in the face of death threats and daily intimidation that Afghan women journalists face.

In a step towards job security, the media were granted retirement benefits through a decree. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of Afghanistan, as per Article 22 of the third chapter of the Labour Law, announced a decree of the High President, whereby all non-government NGOs are obliged to grant retirement benefits to their employees. The media is also included in this sector.

In the past year, two radio stations for women started operating in Farah province. A private television station started operating in the southern province of Uruzgan. Another two radio stations also started broadcasting, one each in Helmand province and in the northern province of Jawzjan.

In a welcome move towards organising, ten media outlets in Kabul set up an organisation called the Freedom Speech House, which is working to ensure the rights of journalists. The day it was officially inaugurated on April 17, it awarded a cash prize and the title of the best journalist of year to Anisa Shaheed, a reporter for Tolo News TV.

Despite these sparks of hope, however, there is still deep concern for the safety of journalists, the advancement of the media and the future of freedom of speech overall. Once US-NATO troops leave Afghanistan, there is no guarantee of an environment that would enable media to flourish.

It is more likely that the situation will gradually deteriorate, and the assassination of media workers will increase. There may be further official restrictions on the media, and journalists will still struggle to access critical information. These worries plague the Afghan media community today. What is clear going forward is that while a definitive peace in Afghanistan is far from assured, the guarantees for press freedom and the protection of journalists of the past 18 years remain threatened.

Cover: A man walks past a barrier wall painted with an image of former Afghan Tolo TV presenter Yama Siawash, who was killed in a bomb attack on November 7, 2020, along a roadside in Kabul. Credit: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

This document has been produced by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on behalf of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSAN).

- Afghan Independent Journalists' Association
- Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum
- Federation of Nepali Journalists
- Federation of Media Employees' Trade Unions, Sri Lanka
- Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka
- Indian Journalists' Union
- Journalists Association of Bhutan
- Maldives Journalists' Association
- National Union of Journalists, India
- National Union of Journalists, Nepal
- Nepal Press Union
- Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists
- Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association

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The SAMSAN Digital Hub – <https://samsn.ifj.org> includes the full 2020-2021 South Asia Press Freedom Report and a full list of all known cases of media rights violations from the 2014 to 2021.

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