Standing Strong

Freedom of the press and the right to access information in Afghanistan saw their darkest days in 2022. With the violent return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the imposition of unprecedented restrictions on journalists and media, the situation in Afghanistan is currently still operating in the country, only 203 of 476 radio networks (43 per cent) were still operating as of 2022. In the period after August 2021, as many as 99 radio stations stopped operating. Another study by Pajhwok Afghan News (Afghanistan’s largest independent news agency) revealed that less than half, or 203 of 476 radio networks (43 per cent) were still functioning. Alongside this countless journalists, who were the main bread winners for their families, lost their jobs. Media outlets currently still operating in the country are struggling, but don’t pay employees regularly; and most journalists work without a salary. Women journalists have been especially hard hit in the period in review. The ANU survey, supported by UNESCO, revealed 80 per cent of women journalists lost their jobs in Afghanistan’s radio sector alone and 91 per cent of those surveyed were in need of financial support.

Media companies and journalists alike in Afghanistan today face the double challenge of political repression and economic hardship in the current climate. Though no strangers to hostile political leaders or showstopping budgets, Afghanistan’s media and its workers are now in desperate straits and need help to survive.

Two steps back

The right to freedom of expression, approved in Article 34 of the Constitution of Afghanistan in 2003, was once regarded as one of the greatest achievements of the former government. Despite ups and downs, it meant that citizens, journalists and the media could express opinions without fear of harassment or interference from government agencies. However, while the Taliban took over, the constitutional values of freedom of expression, the right to access information, and the right to pursue journalistic work also lost all meaning. In today’s Afghanistan, journalists say they cannot freely follow news stories or write about events like they used to before the Taliban. In one case, a journalist in Kabul was arrested merely for using the words “Taliban” and “supervisory government” in a story. French-Afghan journalist Fatemah Lashkari says that “all I can do is write about the Taliban.” In another case, a woman journalist working in Kabul, continues to remain in jail despite mounting international pressure demanding his release.

The Taliban’s attitude toward the press is both ideological and pragmatic. From 1996 to 2001, the group outlawed all media强力地干预媒体的工作。

The destruction of the republican system by the Taliban has had devastating effects especially on female journalists. The Taliban has put increasing restrictions on women journalists, and the issuance of “religious guidelines” has led to the undermining of women’s rights to education and media access by women. Another active journalist Fatemah Lashkari says that she was threatened with violence by the Taliban, and that she has not been able to cover any news related to women and girls since the Taliban came to power.

New media era

The local, hybrid, and international media experience different levels of restriction under the Taliban. The new avatar of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, issued a new set of guidelines on media and its workers are now in desperate straits and need help to survive. It is no surprise that there has been a great amount of adaptation to face these new challenges.

A SWOT analysis of Afghan media conducted by IPS Academy in February 2023 showed that its weaknesses were: lack of revenue generation, decreasing quality of human resources, and disengagement of females – as both audience and workforce; withdrawal of agency funding, and a lack of media literacy within the administration and among the Taliban. In the last six months, because of the war and the lack of awareness about which media houses were now actually independent and which ones were carrying the propaganda.
imposition of restrictions, and critical perspectives are missing from the field reportage.

Freelance journalist Rasool Shahzad says that women who continue their media work in the current situation are real heroes, particularly given their economic situation. According to a report published by Zain Times (Women's Times), the small number of women journalists in the country are Marwa Jalal, a female journalist in Badakhshan province in northern Afghanistan, earned 17,000 Afghanis (USD 195) before the fall of the republican government, while reporting for more than a year without salary. Nagesh Ansari, another journalist, says that sometimes she doesn't even have taxi fare to get to work.

The survey conducted by the Afghan National Journalists Union (ANJU) in 2022, gender equity has taken a severe blow under the Taliban regime. It found that 87 per cent women journalists have been targeted, gender discrimination, 79 per cent said they had been threatened and insulted, including with physical, written and verbal threats, by Taliban officials, while 87 per cent of women journalists said they were not motivated to work in the current situation due to fear and panic. Significantly, 93 per cent of working women journalists reported being the sole economic support of their families.

Attacking the messenger

A report by the Afghan Journalists Center recorded 267 cases of media freedom violations and threats, arrests and violent treatment of journalists in 2022. Except for a few cases, most of the arrests, threats and torture were carried out by the Taliban, especially the security forces and employees of the Intelligence Department.

In 2021, during the fall of the republican government and the return of the Taliban, 109 cases of violence against journalists, including the murders were recorded. But 2022 statistics show that the level of violence against the media and journalists increased by 138 per cent. ANJU confirming 85 cases of arrest and detention of journalists during 2022 and says that the two sides have different interpretations. The journalists call it temporary detention, but the Taliban intelligence group call it a “discussion” about violation by the journalist and their unprofessional and unbalanced reports.

The attack on March 11, 2023, in Balkh in the north showed the insecurity with which journalists in Afghanistan operate. The explosion in Taliban Cultural Center, in a gathering of journalists where many were supposed to be honored for their work, killed two journalists and injured 30 others. Hossein Nudari, a reporter, and Akbar, a journalist, student, lost their lives in the attack later claimed by ISIS.

Two Afghan journalists, Ali Aibak Khakhba, a reporter for local newspaper Sabih-e-Kabul, and Jamahiluddin Deldar, head of Girdiz Voice Radio in Afghanistan’s Farkhina province, both reportedly disappeared from Kabul. Their whereabouts remain unknown since May 24, 2022. In separate incidents in late May 2022, Taliban intelligence agencies detained three media workers in Kabul and Herat.

On May 29, 2022, journalist Roman Karimi and his driver, Samiullah, were detained and beaten by a Taliban intelligence agent who covered a protest and was identifying protesters in the empty streets of Kabul. The driver was beaten and left at the roundabout in Kabul District 10 for Salam Watandar radio station.

Adapt or die

Media with accreditation and offices in Afghanistan must now follow the new rules. Talk shows now feature Taliban spokesmen, reports are increasingly sourced from Taliban channels and the owners of some major media outlets are getting closer to the Taliban to advance their business interests, for example, ownership of mobile networks.

Local media is being asked to respect the new rules, which means they must follow the new rules. The journalists call it temporary detention, but the Taliban intelligence group call it a “discussion” about violation by the journalist and their unprofessional and unbalanced reports. The Taliban have stopped publishing newspapers, magazines and other media content, and impose restrictions, and critical perspectives are missing from the field reportage.

Furthering the surveillance agenda

From 2001 to 2022, several civil society organisations (CSOs) emerged to support the media. The Afghanistan Journalist Federation (AJF) as an umbrella professional association; the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) to monitor press freedom violations and aid journalists under threat; Nai-Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan (Nai-SOMA) to train journalists and coordinate investigations; the other CSOs have been dissolved. This does not mean that we can apply this measure not only struck a blow to foreign channels, but also cut off a reverse stream for local media which is paid to rebroadcast that content.

Media support institutions

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Promisingly, foreign media such as the BBC, VOA and Al Jazeera have more freedom to report within Afghanistan than their local counterparts. Their visiting journalists enjoy relative immunity as the Taliban attempt a charm offensive with the international community. Foreign outlets have been able to negotiate permission to report on sensitive topics like drug addiction and trafficking.

Even as foreign outlets have been able to carry news from Afghanistan to the outside world, the Taliban have blocked Persian and Pashto language services from the other outlets from reaching Afghans. The Taliban banned terrestrial television and radio stations from rebroadcasting foreign-produced programs in March, even as they make the most of what space remains for them.

The Taliban have long spread their message through magazines, newspapers, radio and television. Afghan satellite television is broadcasting out of the United Arab Emirates and Central Asia; some Afghan media outlets are setting up shop in Istanbul, which does not have on-ground dealers. Afghan satellite television is broadcasting out of the United Arab Emirates and Central Asia; some Afghan media outlets are setting up shop in Istanbul, which does not have on-ground dealers. Afghan satellite television is broadcasting out of the United Arab Emirates and Central Asia; some Afghan media outlets are setting up shop in Istanbul, which does not have on-ground dealers. Afghan satellite television is broadcasting out of the United Arab Emirates and Central Asia; some Afghan media outlets are setting up shop in Istanbul, which does not have on-ground dealers. Afghan satellite television is broadcasting out of the United Arab Emirates and Central Asia; some Afghan media outlets are setting up shop in Istanbul, which does not have on-ground dealers. Afghan satellite television is broadcasting out of the United Arab Emirates and Central Asia; some Afghan media outlets are setting up shop in Istanbul, which does not have on-ground dealers. Afghan satellite television is broadcasting out of the United Arab Emirates and Central Asia; some Afghan media outlets are setting up shop in Istanbul, which does not have on-ground dealers.
Open internet access and secure communication with colleagues and sources are important to all journalists. Supporters can help Afghan journalists adopt appropriate technology and prepare backup communication systems in case of internet and mobile service blackouts.

What the future holds

International media support should be part of a holistic diplomatic and development strategy toward Afghanistan because of mutual dependence of media with human rights, education, democracy, and humanitarian efforts. Diplomats should raise press freedom issues when negotiating with the Taliban, specifically pressuring them to reduce restrictions on women in the media. Media and other aid should come with conditionalities of rights protections, independence of grantees from Taliban control, ethical standards, and inclusion of women.

The international community should not help the Taliban build a propaganda machine. Efforts to monitor Afghan media have been ad hoc and incomplete. Systematic monitoring is needed to track what media outlets are publishing, as well as the attacks and restrictions on the press. Aid can then more accurately be directed toward independent media.

International supporters can facilitate communication among Afghan media outlets and encourage the strengthening of inter-organisational associations. Though such groups, media and CSOs can form a united front to engage both the Taliban and international donor community.

Local, hybrid, and foreign media can also support each other’s journalism. A journalist accredited with local media might publish uncounterfactual reports in their own name and contribute anonymously to hybrid media. A foreign reporter might use their privileged position to coordinate reporting with local partners. A transnational communication network might also include journalists from other countries with lessons from working in repressive environments.

As Afghan media outlets shift to social media as both a newswatching channel and a channel for reaching audiences, they might learn from organisations experienced in online reporting and monetizing online content. Social media platforms and tech sector experts might also help them develop new revenue streams and ways of connecting with audiences.

A problem for all media in need of international financial support is getting money into Afghanistan. Solutions might include waivers on sanctions to allow media access to the SWIFT payment system, or channelling money to the media through UN agencies with sanctions waivers.

Established journalists will benefit from training and technical support on using secure communication technology and safe reporting. Digital journalism training can support the shift to online reporting, open-source investigation, and data journalism. Within Afghanistan, CSOs can restart training programs, albeit under Taliban oversight.

The Taliban have taken over the education system and are revising curricula, including of journalism schools, to conform to their ideology. Programs are needed to train the next generation of Afghan journalists. Mentorship models where journalists abroad collaborate with young colleagues in Afghanistan can be expanded. Girls and women face a ban on education beyond primary school, creating a special need for media training oriented toward women.

Afghan journalism took a heavy blow in August 2021, and since then the Taliban has worked step by step to control the media and its citizens’ access to information. The spotlight of international attention and aid has meanwhile shifted away from Afghanistan, leaving Afghan journalists, especially women journalists, at home and abroad, without the support they need.

But all is not lost for the resilient Afghan media. International supporters can help ensure the survival of independent journalism through financial and diplomatic means and by facilitating communication among media organisations, CSOs, and other stakeholders.

The documentary has been produced by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on behalf of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN).

Afghan Independent Journalists’ Union
Afghanistan’s National Journalists Union
Bangladesh Media Monitors’ Sangsadik Forum
Federation of Nepal 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
Press Union
Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists
Sri Lanka Working Journalists’ Association
South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) – Defending rights of journalists and freedom of expression in South Asia. samsn@ifj.org/

The full IFJ South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022-23 is available at: https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR22-23

PDFs of country chapters are also available for download from each country page.

The online report also includes country reports for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as well as a full list of jailed and detained journalists in South Asia and the IFJ list of media rights violations by journalists Safety Indicators (JSIs), May 2022 to April 2023.

Front cover: The Taliban has placed increasing restrictions on women journalists, including prohibiting women journalists from appearing in front of the camera, wearing garments, hijabs, and face coverings in May, 2022. An Afghan female presenter with news network 1TV, Lina Spezialy with her face covered by a veil, takes a break during a live broadcast at the JTV channel station in Kabul on May 28. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

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21ST ANNUAL SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2022-2023

Continuing Clampdown In
Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

Taliban’s return to power forced media organisations to shut shop and intensify political suppression and hostility towards female journalists

The crisis has also displaced hundreds of journalists and current estimates say 200 Afghan journalists are living in Pakistan and 100 in Iran as refugees.

On May 19, a decree was issued instructing all female broadcast journalists to cover their faces while on air

49.6% of the 579 media outlets have stopped functioning since Taliban’s return

95% The functioning outlets have no source of income and cannot pay their employees

90% female journalists experienced gender discrimination, 80% were insulted and humiliated and 87% were not motivated to work in the current situation due to fear.