

AFGHANISTAN

NO PEACE FOR
THE MEDIA

Since the launch of peace talks between the Taliban and the United States in Doha in October 2018 and the subsequent collapse of negotiations in September 2019, the media and journalists in Afghanistan have continued to come under increasing pressure. With it, there has been a rise in threats and intimidation emanating not just from the emboldened Taliban or the Afghan government, but also from other terrorist groups, powerbrokers and warlords.

The Taliban, well-known for their disdain of press freedom, has attempted to control the country's media even in times of apparent peace. Besieged media houses and reporters have been given clear warnings, as the Taliban openly intimidated journalists. In June 2019, the Taliban threatened Afghan media organisations, warning them to stop spreading “anti-jihad and Taliban sentiments” or be targeted as enemies.

Afghanistan remains one of the world's most deadly countries for media workers, leading the IFJ's global death tally with 16 killings in 2018. In 2019, while the numbers killed dropped to five, the country remained in second place on the global death toll, equally with Syria and Tanzania.

Heightened violence against journalists has severely eroded any gains in press freedom. Media workers and advocates fear that safeguards to protect media freedoms are falling through the cracks of Afghanistan's fragile peace process and its fractured leadership.

After a series of threats to the country's independent media, the Taliban issued an official statement against the media portal *khabarial.com* signed by the spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahed on February 9. “For a while now a web-based page named *Khabarial* has launched propaganda against known leaders of Islamic Emirate. The webpage is trying to blur public's opinion about the leaders....We consider these actions of the webpage personal attacks, an intelligence agency project and against all journalistic values and principles. We assure all our compatriots that the propaganda by the webpage is not true.”

After the Taliban's statement, 80 per cent of *khabarial.com* staff quit their jobs because of ongoing threats. The portal is known for publishing inside news from the Taliban, with several news stories and information carried on the site later referenced by Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, in his speeches. As a result, staff at the media portal found themselves even more of a target.

As has been well documented, the Taliban are unforgiving in their treatment of journalists. First they launch a negative social media campaign against a media outlet or reporter. A fatwa or religious decree is then issued, followed by a harshly worded statement. The final step may even be the death of a reporter or a violent attack on a media outlet.

The presidential election in September 2019 was marked by deep divisions and questions about the legitimacy of the Afghan government. In February 2020, incumbent president Ashraf Ghani, was declared winner with just over 50 per cent of the vote, almost five months after voting initially took place. But in an interesting turn of events, CEO Abdullah Abdullah also declared himself the winner, the result being a complex power sharing arrangement with the rival politicians both claiming to be the legitimate leader.



A man walks past a wall painted with an image of US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Kabul on April 5, 2020. Access to information remained a serious issue during the Covid-19 pandemic for Afghan journalists. CREDIT: WAKIL KOHSAR / AFP

The disunity that dominated Afghanistan's election was also reflected in the media community. Vested interests took advantage of divisions and anti-government elements called the media a puppet, accusing them of undermining the customs and traditions of Afghanistan. In the wake of the divisive elections, the Taliban openly threatened media workers. The government also manipulated reporters to its advantage, which in turn caused some sections of the media to lose their credibility among the general public.

QUIET CONTROL

Between the curbs instigated by the Taliban and control by the authorities, freedom of expression in Afghanistan hangs precariously in the balance. Afghanistan has a vibrant and varied media landscape, with dozens of TV networks, over 100 radio stations and a multitude of privately-owned newspapers.



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The increased availability of mobile phones, the internet and social media has exposed Afghans to diverse news.

Despite positive developments in media freedom, Freedom House’s 2019 study of political rights and civil liberties worldwide, still ranks Afghanistan “not free” in its global freedom scores. “Journalists face the threat of harassment and attack by the Islamic State (IS) militant group, the Taliban, and government-related figures attempting to influence how they are covered in the news. Restrictions on freedom of expression have been justified in the name of avoiding incitement to or support of terrorism,” said its report.

Zia Bumiya, head of the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) in Afghanistan, says the Taliban has taken advantage of disunity to keep the Afghan media under pressure. He also

believes that the Afghan government is not truly committed to freedom of the press and imposes laws that threaten or restrict freedom of expression and access to information. The government seems intent on controlling media, for example instructing agencies not to share information with reporters without confirmation from the central government, he said.

Self-censorship is ongoing in what Human Rights Watch has referred to as a ‘survival issue’ for most reporters. The survival instinct is particularly acute for journalists working in remote areas where they are cautious reporting on issues of corruption, land grabbing or violence against women, in fear of retribution.

Shewa Sharq, deputy director of broadcasting in the Ministry of Information and Culture, said that the media would remain free, and that he would not allow anyone to hinder the freedom



Afghan women voters queue to cast their ballot during the presidential election at a polling station on September 28, 2019. The disunity that dominated the election was also reflected in the media community.
CREDIT: HOSHANG HASHIMI / AFP

of the press. “If the Taliban or anyone within the government is obstructing the freedom of the media, I will stand against them, and I will support the media of any restrictions,” he said.

However, the government does not speak in one voice, and other government officials do not necessarily agree with Sharq. Attempts to censor the hugely popular satirical television programs continued in the year under review. Letters requesting media outlets not to produce satirical programs were sent to a number of television stations by the Ministry of Information and Culture. Hard-hitting satire about government officials and policies was discouraged. Though the government’s request was addressed to officials in the television channels, the confidential advisory became public and was sharply condemned.

In early 2020, it seemed that some government officials consciously tried to exert pressure on the media, most often by restricting or withholding information meant to reach the public. Responding to these restrictions, Afghan media outlets at a protest meeting on February 8, blamed the government for obstructing the free flow of information. Media outlets issued a signed statement urging the government to allow media access to information and requested the government to direct its spokespersons and officials to cooperate in sharing information.

Mujeeb Khalvatgar, executive director of Nai-Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, said that not sharing information poses a severe threat to the media in Afghanistan, and impacts the independence of the media. According to Nai data, during the six days in the second week of March, there were ten complaints filed about state officials who had not shared information with journalists, and there were also some cases where journalists were disrespected.

Citizens of Afghanistan consider the country’s media one of the most significant achievements of democracy in the last two decades. But now it is feared that freedom of expression is in grave danger and there is a growing view that the media is biased, focussing only on war and unwilling to take up issues of governance and corruption that affect daily lives.

SHAPING THE NARRATIVE

In a display of irony, the Taliban too deny that they impose restrictions on the media. Sohail Shaheen, a spokesman for the Taliban’s political office in Qatar, said that the Taliban does not want to impose restrictions on the media, but if the media is broadcasting “inappropriate” material, it has to “change the direction” of its broadcasts.

“We ask the media to spread the truth instead of rumours. We will try to reform the media that broadcasts based on the projects [implementing other countries’ policy],” said Shaheen, who moots the idea of creating a framework within which the media must work.

It seems as though the Afghan government also agrees with Shaheen in this regard. The officials say that the media is the fourth pillar of the government, with full freedom, and they do not want the media to be restricted. But officials also say that in some exceptional cases, it would be better for the media to change its stance.

A spokesman for the Afghan president, Dawa Khan Minapal, said that the president and the current system is committed to media freedom and that they would not allow anyone to impose restrictions on the media. To illustrate his point, he referred to social media users in Kabul who are critics of the government but continue to live freely without any government interference.

However, this ‘freedom’ may be because the government is not monitoring social media platforms and is therefore in no position to control them. In some cases a number of local commanders, militants and other officials including governors issue threats and arrest social-media users because of what they share. Most Afghan officials use social media for propaganda purposes. They also largely tolerate no criticism so any user making negative comments against them can face the prospect of being beaten or jailed.

A case in point was the first vice-president of Afghanistan Amrullah Saleh who filed a case on February 25 against

Security personnel inspect a damaged Sikh religious complex alongside media representatives following a gun attack in Kabul on March 25, 2020. At least 25 people were killed in the attack, claimed by the Islamic State. CREDIT: STR / AFP



IN ADDITION TO KILLING AND INJURING JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA EMPLOYEES, THERE WERE ATTACKS ON MEDIA OFFICES, ABDUCTIONS, BEATINGS, DEATH THREATS, IMPRISONMENT, PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE, THREATS AND LACK OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION.

39 Facebook users who criticised him during the election campaign in 2019. Journalists and media rights organisations said that proper procedure was not followed and the complaints should have been lodged with the Media Offense and Complaints Commission.

VIOLENCE AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Despite the claims of media freedom, Hujatullah Mujadidi, executive member of IFJ affiliate Afghanistan Independent Journalist Association (AIJA), noted that there were more than a hundred incidents of violence against journalists in 2019 alone, including 10 deaths. Of these, six were directly related to an individual's role as a journalist. There were also 10 beatings, 10 arrests, three assault cases, three kidnappings involving eight journalists, one rape case and 34 instances of threats against media workers.

Data collected by Nai and the Afghanistan Journalists Center, also found 119 cases of violence against journalists reported from April 2019 to March 2020.

In addition to killing and injuring journalists and media employees, there were attacks on media offices, abductions, beatings, death threats, imprisonment, psychological pressure, threats and lack of access to information.

According to Nai-Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, six journalists were abducted, five were beaten, and five others were detained by armed Taliban and other terrorist groups in 2019. Ten complaints of lack of access to information were reported. Two media centres were attacked, and two media centres were also closed due to financial problems. Three journalists were summoned by government officials. The equipment of three journalists was stolen, and the reporters were pressured while on duty. Some other reporters and social

media workers were summoned to the Attorney Office for criticising senior government officials.

The IFJ's *Journalists and Media Staff Killed in 2019* report noted that Afghanistan remained the Asia Pacific's most deadly country for media again in 2019. The journalists killed in the year to March 2020 include female journalist and former television anchor Mina Mangal, who was shot dead in broad daylight in Kabul in May 2019, and editor-in-chief of Radio Gardez Ghag, Nader Shah Sahebzadeh whose body was found a day after he had disappeared after leaving his home in Gardiz city to visit a friend.

Also, Sakhi Baloch, a technical assistant of the National Radio Television in Zabul province, was abducted by unknown people in June, while on his way home from the office. He was found dead the next day in Qalat city and Abdul Hamid Hotaki, a Hewad Radio and Television reporter in Kandahar, was killed on September 25 in Kandahar City. Safar Mohammed Atal was mysteriously killed in Lashkar Gah of Helmand province on January 2, 2020.

The most recent case of violence against journalists in Afghanistan was reported on March 8, 2020, when Noor Rahim Atif, the editor-in-chief of Kaihan Radio in Kunduz province, along with his friends were kidnapped nearly 10 km far from the city by the Taliban. One friend who tried to escape was shot dead.

Although there has been a significant reduction in cases of journalist killings in 2019 over 2018, which was considered the deadliest year for Afghani journalists worldwide, other violations have not decreased.

Multiple media violations against journalists were recorded during the fourth round of

Afghanistan's presidential elections in September 2019. The IFJ and its affiliate AIJA, condemned the attacks on at



Hujatullah Mujadidi, vice president of AIJA, meets with Muhammad Anwar Khan Ishaqzai, governor of Logar, on February 11, 2020, to discuss challenges facing journalists and media. CREDIT: AIJA

least three journalists. AIJA fielded at least ten complaints by journalists regarding access to information, access to voting sites and telecommunications shutdowns.

Among a string of other attacks, AIJA also documented a bomb attack that seriously injured a reporter travelling in a military convoy on November 30, 2019.

The Taliban and ISIS are responsible for most of these violations. Also, high-ranking government officials, police, powerbrokers, arbitrary commanders and warlords have also been among the perpetrators of media violations.

Sayed Shah Saqim, the Independent Local Government Bureau spokesman, said it was working to deal effectively with the problems of journalists in the provinces, adding that governors, deputy governors and district governors had been instructed to respond to journalists' questions in a timely manner and handle their problems at monthly journalist committee meetings.

Jamshid Rasouli, a spokesman of Supreme Prosecutor's Office, emphasised that the government's commitment to handling cases of violence against journalists was solid and that as a result of the joint efforts of the government and media committee, no cases of violence against journalists were left unanswered.

According to the Attorney General's Office, 38 people have been arrested in the course of investigating the killings of journalists, of whom over 26 have been sentenced to short prison terms and up to 12 were under investigation and trial.

MORE VULNERABLE

Women journalists in particular are also not secure and face similar threats and intimidation. Insecurity, psychological and social pressures – including from the family – have caused female journalists to quit their jobs in the media.

Farida Nekzad, head of the Center for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ), says; insecurity, social traditions, media financial problems, and sexual harassment are among the factors that have negatively impacted the

working environment of female journalists in the country.

"Unfortunately, threats by the anti-government elements in 12 provinces of Afghanistan - Kunar, Logar, Paktika, Paktia, Helmand, Nuristan, Zabul, Khost, Uruzgan, Nimroz, Maidan Wardak and Panjshir - and social customs have ensured that no female journalist is working anymore in the media in these provinces," she said.

According to information from the Center for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ), there are 8,000 media workers in the country, of which around 1,800 are female. While the center has documented that there are 523 private media outlets operating in the country, with almost 200 audio, visual and print media which have had their activities impacted by economic problems and security issues, women are the most vulnerable. Media and civil society groups have launched campaigns for the protection of the rights of female media journalists as a central component of media freedom and the path to peace.

JOINT ADVOCACY

The Government and Media Joint Committee has taken action on incidents of violence and harassment against journalists. The Committee, operating under the relatively progressive vice-president Sarwar Danish, has also tried to mediate issues between journalists and the government, particularly with regard to arrests and intimidation.

On December 29, when the joint committee presented its annual report on violence against journalists, interior ministry spokesman, Nusrat Rahimi, said Afghanistan had a total of 117 cases of murder of journalists and media staff since 2001. Of those, 32 had been brought to court and 23 perpetrators had been killed as a result of operational operations; There were 55 other cases of explosions and attacks against journalists that were claimed by opposition groups.

The Committee has also sought to review structural and legal reforms, in an effort to advance labour rights. In this respect, there have been significant achievements in pension rights.



Disinfecting of media offices and teaching health and safety methods during Covid-19 at was part of a training conducted by the Independent Journalists' Association (AIJA) in Baghlan province. CREDIT: AIJA

THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF HIDING FACTS ABOUT THE NUMBERS AND SPREAD OF THE CORONAVIRUS, AND INCORRECT DATA HAS BEEN SHARED WITH THE MEDIA.

With the exception of Moby Group and Ariana Television in Afghanistan, the rest of the national media do not provide pension entitlements to their employees; neither do their employees have insurance, nor do they provide vocational education. The government has created a pension regulation mechanism for private and non-government organisations. From 2021 it will be mandatory for all media outlets to pay their employees pensions after their retirement.

Collaborative work towards press freedom and journalists' rights continues under the banner of the 'Federation of Journalists' Associations and Media' which was launched in 2013 after a four-year long process of bringing together diverse organisations. Members of the Federation include the Association of Independent Journalists of Afghanistan; National Union of Journalists of Afghanistan; National Union of Journalists and Reporters of Afghanistan; South Asia Free Media Association; South Asian Journalists' Independent Association; Afghan Journalists Defending Committee; Afghanistan Journalists' Protection Committee and NAI the supporter of independent news agencies in Afghanistan; GAHEEZ Cultural and Media Centre; Media Market; Kabul Press Club and Women Journalists' Support Centre.

Interventions were made in the process of law reform, as well as pushing for investigations in cases of violence against journalists and aligning regulations governing the safety and security of journalists with international standards.

VIRAL MISINFORMATION

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a direct impact on the media in various ways, from working hours to safety concerns. For instance, Tolo News and the Moby group have rejigged working hours to three five-hour shifts in

order to prevent overcrowding inside the building. Facilities have been provided for protection of staff that do work on site, while 40 per cent of the employees work from home. The reduction in news staff due to Covid-19 has reduced the 30 daily news bulletins at Tolo to 20 per day, and the duration too has been reduced. In terms of format, televised debates, interviews and talk shows in studios have been stopped, while for current affairs programs, guests in studios are restricted in number, while Skype interviews have increased.

Advertising too has taken a beating during the pandemic, and the financial situation is grave. However, there are no job losses as yet due to the pandemic.

In the first few months of 2020, access to information remains a serious issue during the Covid-19 pandemic. The government has been accused of hiding facts about the numbers and spread of the coronavirus, and incorrect data has been shared with the media. Infection rates in the areas under the control of the Taliban have been totally ignored and there is no awareness program to inform people about how to protect themselves against Covid-19.

Even during the health crisis, the country's leadership is divided, resulting in a dysfunctional response to the pandemic. The government has failed to provide clear and accurate information, and skirts questions on the severity of the crisis. At the same time, reporters are told to toe the government line, undermining their ability to present timely and accurate information.

As hard-won media freedoms are curtailed by ongoing violence and intimidation, a flawed electoral system, censorship, a faltering peace process and the challenge of living through and reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists in Afghanistan face a bleak future.