

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan



حمایت کننده رسانه های آزاد در افغانستان
Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan

MEDIA WATCH REPORT

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journalists to properly perform their task of reporting about the Elections' process, counting ballots, and announcement of preliminary and final results.

On the eve of the Elections, the Law of Access to Information is crucial for the media sector. Yet, in spite of repeated calls made by the Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan on the Law to be approved as a legislative statute, the President of the country has not taken any measure.

The President of Afghanistan is aware that journalists have demanded from him, through a signed letter, to sign the Law of Access to Information. However, the President has not signed the draft into Law yet and his office refrained from making any clear comment about it.

If the Law of Access to Information is signed then journalists, through quick and timely access to information, can provide more accurate and enhanced reports on the Elections which will help people make more informed decisions in choosing their next president as well as their new provincial council members.

As mentioned above, the State should reconsider the demand by media and journalists and particularly the President should sign the Law of Access to Information as a legislative statute. The Parliament should immediately debate on the Statute and approve it as soon as the representatives return from their winter break.

The current issue of the Newsletter covers the following topics:

- 1. Guards at Ibn-e-Sina Hospital Insulted and Threatened Mitra TV Journalists**
- 2. The Spokesperson for the Northern Police Headquarters Insulted and Threatened Radio Rabia-e-Balkhi Journalist**
- 3. Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan Called for Formation of Special Group to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists**
- 4. Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan Celebrated World Radio Day**

Guards at Ibn-e-Sina Hospital Insulted and Threatened Mitra TV Journalist and Cameraman

Guards, who belong to the police forces, at Ibn-e- Sina Hospital insulted and threatened the producer of Dard, the health program on Mitra TV, and the TV cameraman, Mr. Wahid Popal.

The incident took place when the journalists wanted to interview with some patients and doctors at the hospital for their program.

Dr. Pardis, the producer of Mitra TV's health program, told Media Watch: "Dard Program on Mitra TV aims at promoting reform and improvement in the country's hospitals through exposing their shortcomings and problems which affect citizens."

He added that officials at Ibn-e-Sina Hospital tried through this incident to prevent them from exposing their shortcomings.

Mr. Pardis called the behavior of the hospital's guards as coordinated with the authorities at the Hospital and said that individuals with such behavior toward people and clients should not be assigned to maintain the security of the Hospital.

Mr. Wahid Popal, cameraman at Mitra TV Station, told Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan: "When we entered Ibn-e-Sina Hospital to record our program, we immediately faced an insulting behavior by the guards before the eyes of tens of patients and doctors in the yard. Although we had official letters from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Public Health, and we had coordinated with the district police, the Hospital's police guard did not pay any attention to those permissions and even wanted to hit our camera to the ground."

Meanwhile, Kawa Jobran, Head of Mitra TV programs, confirmed the insulting behavior of police guards toward the TV's journalist and cameraman and told Media Watch: "Security officials at Ibn-e-Sina Hospital have humiliated and insulted Mitra TV's journalist and cameraman."

He added that such behavior from security officials toward journalists has turned to common practice. In spite of frequent incidence of such violent behaviors toward journalists, officials have sufficed by apologizing and had never seriously followed such cases.

Sidiq Sidiqi, Spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior, said he was not aware of the erratic behavior of Police but said that the matter would be followed seriously and the perpetrators would be punished.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan calls on responsible security officials to punish perpetrators. Blocking journalists from covering their topics will ultimately keep people in the dark on the shortcomings and defects in governmental organizations.

No one, including security officials, has the right to prevent journalists from making their reports and conducting interviews. Threatening, intimidating, and insulting journalists, regardless of who commits them, are unlawful and should be followed by legal response. In particular when

journalists have already coordinated with relevant organizations to cover topics of interest, no security officer has the right to prevent them through intimidation and threatening from conducting their job.

Although Mitra TV journalists had already obtained the Hospital's permission to shoot their program, this incident shows that there are currently individuals among the police that lack essential awareness about laws and are even ignorant of their superiors' commands.

The Spokesperson for Balkh Police Headquarters Threatened and Temporarily Arrested a Journalist

Lal Mohammad Ahmadzai, the spokesperson for Balkh Police Headquarters, insulted, threatened, and briefly arrested Khosraw Yaqeen, a reporter for Radio Rabia-e-Balkhi, in Mazar-e-Sharif on January 26, 2014 after the latter commented under a former's status in Facebook.

Lal Mohammad Ahmadzai, the spokesperson for Balkh Police Headquarters, had criticized 'Setar-e-Afghan', an entertaining music program produced by Tolo TV, and called music in his Facebook page as a source for moral corruption and therefore anti-Islamic. In parts of his writing he had also called organizing such programs as eventually creating distance between people of Afghanistan and their religion.

Khosraw Yaqeen, a reporter for Radio Rabia-e-Balkhi then commented on Mr. Ahmadzai's status in Facebook: "As a spokesperson for Northern Police Headquarters you should not write so and such topics in Facebook. We already face a lot of political and security problems that still need to be dealt with as burning questions. Also one should not insult those youth who want to serve their country through art and music."

Khosraw Yaqeen told Media Watch: "Hours after I posted my comments under Lal Mohammad Ahmadzai's status in Facebook, a police ranger vehicle with an official call letter came to me. The police told me that they were tasked to take me to Police District Office One; instead they took me directly to Balkh Police Headquarters. There, through a violent, insulting, and humiliating behavior they asked me to apologize or else they would introduce me to criminal police which would put me in prison. I now share this incident with you so that you are aware of it should they cause any further problems for me in the future."

Media Watch at Nai took the matter seriously and shared it with officials from the Ministry of Interior in Balkh province.

Officials at the Ministry of Interior assured Media Watch that they will immediately and seriously pursue the case and will share the results.

In less than a week time, officials at the Ministry of Interior contacted and informed Media Watch about dismissal of Lal Mohammad Ahmadzai from his official duty as spokesperson for Balkh Police Headquarters.

The source added that Mr. Ahmadzai was dismissed on the charge of abusing his state official post.

But Mr. Khosraw Yaqeen has still remained concerned. He says that he has been threatened through phone calls and chased by unknown individuals ever since Mr. Ahmadzai has been dismissed from his job.

Media Watch considers the incident of insulting, threatening, and briefly arresting of Radio Rabi-e-Balkhi reporter as an unlawful action. In addition, abuse of official office and powers to insult and threaten individuals is a crime in itself. The perpetrators of such criminal acts should be penalized.

Media Watch at Nai appreciates Ministry of Interior's quick action to dismiss the staff involved in this case and meanwhile calls for legal punishment of perpetrators who commit violence against journalists. This will help flatten the graph of violence against journalists while increasing public trust in state and the police.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan Called for Formation of Special Group to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan is concerned about the increasing trend of violence against journalists in the country and therefore welcomes the United Nations' efforts to decrease the incidence of violence.

On November 26, 2013, members of the United Nations' General Assembly announced in a resolution their response to the increase in violence against journalists. The Resolution calls upon the member States to take measures for the safety of journalists. It also proclaimed November 2 as the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan considers the United Nations' Resolution on safety of journalists and the issue of impunity as a positive step towards provision of security for journalists in all member countries, particularly in Afghanistan. Therefore, Nai calls on the United Nations

Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and in particular on the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General to Afghanistan, to form a working group to study the pitfalls and challenges that journalism faces in Afghanistan and to contribute in reverting the increasing trend of violence against journalists.

Sidiquallah Tawhidi, Director of Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, stated in a press conference that Media Watch is ready to provide information on violence against journalists in Afghanistan. Mr. Tawhidi called for immediate formation of the Group so that it presses the State of Afghanistan to provide security for journalists in the country.

Mr. Tawhidi said: “We call on UNAMA and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General to form this working group in cooperation with Nai and other media and journalists advocacy organizations. We can provide such a Group with information on the status of journalists and violence against them. The Group can initiate serious investigations on the cases of violence against journalists and can press the State of Afghanistan to take necessary measures to lower the incidence of violence against journalists.”

Mr. Tawhidi also called on the State of Afghanistan to promote a safe environment for media and journalists across the country through formulating appropriate strategies and cooperation with UNAMA.

The United Nations Resolution calls on member States not to keep silent on the criminal cases against journalists. On the basis of the principle of equality of all citizens before law, it asks the States to legally pursue any perpetrator including State officials who commit violence against journalists. This Resolution aims at eradicating the culture of impunity from due punishment.

The Resolution is adopted at the time that the rate of violence against journalists in Afghanistan is increasing which demands the State of Afghanistan that as its national and international responsibility should take necessary measures to provide security for journalists and media.

Said Habibullah, UNESCO’s public relations officer in Kabul, told Media Watch at Nai: “Gathering and publicizing information, facts and data on violence against journalists to increase awareness of relevant organizations is a civil task. This can play a significant role in promoting safety for journalists. UNESCO considers formation of a committee in coordination with State, media, professional forums in the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations to work on gathering data on violence against journalists and to sensitize the State, the Parliament, civil society as well as the international community.”

According to the statistics and cases recorded by Media Watch at Nai, a large number of journalists have been targets of violence in the last decade. Yet many of the recorded cases of violence against journalists have remained untouched or abandoned by the State. In particular, the Ministry of Information and Culture and legal and judicial organs have either failed or lacked the intention to deal with those cases. It is worth to mention that, except in the cases of murdering journalists, government officials tops the list of perpetrators in all other forms of violence against journalists. Journalists can work to their fullest capacity only in safe and secure environments. Lack of security limits the capacity of journalists and citizens to fully use and benefit from their right of speech and press freedom.

Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan emphasizes on full implementation of the UN Resolution on security of journalists and subsequently calls on the State of Afghanistan to turn the Resolution into its priority agenda.

Nai also believes that a joint group of media advocacy organizations and UNAMA needs to be formed to closely observe the implementation of each and every provision of the UN Resolution by the State of Afghanistan. The group should also press the State to devise and implement an appropriate strategy to promote safety and security of journalists.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan Celebrated World Radio Day

February 13 is adopted as the World Radio Day by the United Nations. Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan celebrated World Radio Day in Kabul.

Sidiqullah Tawhidi, Director of Media Watch at Nai, praised role of radio in Afghanistan and congratulated radio directors in the country and abroad.

Mr. Tawhidi described the role of radio in disseminating and sharing information and news messages as important in Afghanistan because the majority of citizens here have limited access to power energy supply as well as to literacy. Therefore, they listen to radio.

Meanwhile the State's demand from electronic media to provide a 20% bank guarantee at the time of registration or renewal of their license has raised concerns among the community of radio directors. They see it more as a means of pressure imposed on them by the State.

Abdulbasir Haqju, head of local Radio Amu in Badakhshahn province, describes the mandatory 20% bank guarantee as a heavy burden on radio stations and says: "The State has taken this

decision to cease the growth and development of media specially radios. He asked media advocacy organizations to prevent the government from implementing its decision.”

Also Mohammad Gul Khairkhaah, director of Radio Tanin in Shindand district of Herat province, mentioned his inability to provide such a guarantee to the State. He said: “Given the financial and economic challenges that radios face, I will never be able to provide such a guarantee. We protested but it didn’t hit any target. We demand from media advocacy organizations, in particular from Nai, to press the State to stop putting further pressures on media.”

Radio directors in Afghanistan describe insecurity, economic challenges, State’s pressure, and lack of access to information as their major problems.

Economic challenges come second to the increasing insecurity in the list of major challenges for radio stations in Afghanistan. They have seriously affected some radio stations.

Sidiqullah Tawhidi, Director of Media Watch at Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, describes the government’s decision to demand 20% bank guarantee as unlawful and calls on the Government of Afghanistan to cancel its decision and provide a free environment for media as stated in the Law. This is especially important now that radios face several challenges including financial and economic ones.

Haji Zaher, head of frequency licensure at Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority (ATRA) told Media Watch that ATRA will save the 20% bank guarantee from Radio and TV stations and will only deduct from it if a station fails to pay its taxes or any other financial dues.

Head of Frequency Licensure does not consider concerns from media particularly radio directors as valid because he believes that 20% bank guarantee is not so heavy a burden.

Electronic media pay to the National Radio Television a certain amount of money as their fees annually. But recently Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority (ATRA) decided to charge electronic media an extra 20% of the annual fees as a bank guarantee.

As the planned exit of international forces from Afghanistan continues and the financial assistance of their countries decreases, radio stations face harder financial challenges every day. Against this backdrop, a charge of extra 20% puts a heavy pressure on the shoulders of radio owners who cannot afford to provide it.

After overthrow of Taliban regime in 2001, freedom of speech has significantly grown in the country. There are over 160 local private radio stations currently operating in Afghanistan.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan calls on the State of Afghanistan to promote a free and safe environment for media particularly for radios and do not allow any state or non-state organization to put pressure on media in violation to the Law.

Attention!

All journalists and media organizations are hereby notified that Mr. Mohammad Qasem Rahmani works with the Media Watch in the capacity of Media Lawyer. Those journalists and/or media outlets that face legal issues in connection with their media related and journalistic activities, or need consultation on performing such activities, may contact him by phone at **0799 830 905** or via email at: m.qasim@nai.org.af .

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To obtain a soft copy of the report, please visit the following link: <http://www.nai.org.af/Mediawatch.htm>

Note:

1. *To maintain confidentiality and to protect sources it was not possible for Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan to corroborate the incidents by carrying out additional investigations.*
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