

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan



نای حمایت کننده رسانه های آزاد در افغانستان
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Preamble:

With the establishment of a new government based on values of democracy and human rights, many people were hopeful that writers and journalists would not have to worry about speaking their thoughts, and that the black hands of censorship would no longer strangle their voice or tie their hands. However, as time passes, it has become apparent that although censorship and dictatorship has disappeared from the country, its influence is still present in some government entities that do not respect freedom of speech or tolerate writings against their personal interests.

Journalists' fears increase daily and the government has not been capable of ensuring full safety and security for this bright-minded social class. In some cases government authorities make unlawful use of their power and commit violence against journalists including direct and indirect threats and/or humiliation and beating.

Although the government proudly mentions freedom of speech and press freedom as an important achievement of the current regime, it is evident that measures for ensuring the institutionalization of freedom of speech in government entities - especially security and military organs - have been far less than adequate. Government armed forces have committed violence against journalists, but in most cases, government either keeps quiet or saves itself from the media criticisms with the stereotypical sentence "the case is under consideration".

Despite all the challenges facing journalists, there are hopeful prospects for media in Afghanistan that should also be mentioned alongside the challenges and problems.

Gatherings of journalists from Afghanistan and other regional countries help bring the nations closer and bridge gaps. These events provide journalists an opportunity to express their concerns and share professional experiences in a safe and open atmosphere.

Of note is the conference that brought together Afghan and Pakistani journalists, and it is expected that journalists from both countries will comply with accepted journalistic standards in their practice.

Meanwhile, the Afghan government occasionally issues declarations against the media, which pave the way for self-censorship among journalists.

Criticizing the media for broadcasting semi-naked or indecent pictures has turned into a habit among some government officials, who may want revenge because they have been criticized by media for unsatisfactory work or corruption.

Sometimes, it has even been said that certain media broadcasts strengthens national insecurity. Now the point is that such measures originate in the overall policy of the Afghan government regarding reconciliation with anti-government elements, that they want to somehow imply that the government is ready to accept certain demands of the Taliban.

On the other hand, most of the government declarations do not define the range of limitations in accordance with the media law. Thanks to the ambiguous nature of the declarations, the government can criticize any media programming at its sole discretion.

The Ministry of Information and Culture, in its position as the main government agency to support media, is also pressured to impose limitations on media.

The support of freedom of speech and the media does not mean promoting a culture of anarchy, and intervention in internal affairs of media is contradictory with laws regardless of which authority commits it.

The Ministry of Information and Culture should hold a consultative conference soon as possible to discuss and formulate media strategy to be independent of such declarations.

Also it is a measure of success that some new weekly newspapers were established in Kabul over the past month, which is an indication of the growth of the news print sector.

It is hoped that with the increase in the number of media outlets, a culture of newspaper reading will also be bolstered among people.

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Armed Gunman Attack Radio Paiman in Baghlan Province

According to Paiman radio station manager Shir Mohammad Jahish, armed individuals broke into Paiman radio station on January 31st at 2:00 am. After tying up and beating the guard, they took away the station's archive and transmitter.

Mr. Jahish said: "After breaking the doors and tying the guard with cable, they destroyed all technical equipment and took away some documents and the hard disc we were using as the archive."



Mr. Jahish attributes the raid to the Islamic Party (Hezb-e-Islami) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatiar, and said with the exception of this group, others were unable to launch such attacks in that area. “We have some recorded voices that before this incident the government opposition groups such as Hezb-e-Islami party and the Taliban were warning us to stop our certain programs, otherwise they would take measures to shut down the radio,” said Jahish.

However, Baghlan police chief General Abdurrahman Rahimi regarded the incident as a personal issue of Radio Paiman, with no political dimension. He rejected the involvement of the Hezb-e-Islami party and the Taliban, and reported the arrest of two suspects. He said the case is still under investigation.

In 2007, Radio Paiman was set up in Baghlan-e-Sanhati area of Baghlan Province. Later, according to staff members, the radio was moved to Baghlan-e-Markazi for security reasons, but subsequently moved back to Baghlan-e-Sanhati.

Officials of Paiman radio station say the station received several threats from armed government opposition members before it got attacked.

Journalist unions and national and international media advocacy organizations condemned the destruction and looting of Paiman radio station in the strongest possible terms.

Reporters without Borders condemned the act in a press release and called for a police investigation.

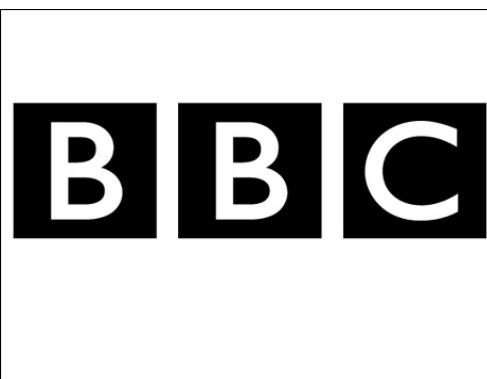
In a press release, Media Watch of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan denounced the attack directed at Paiman radio station as an act against freedom of speech and the right to information. Media Watch called upon government authorities - especially security organs - to identify and arrest the perpetrators of this brutal crime.

Media Watch reiterates that the government of Afghanistan is bound by the Constitution and other prevailing laws of the country to ensure the security of natural and legal persons including media outlets and journalists.

BBC Correspondent Beaten in Balkh University

On January 19th, BBC correspondent Kanishka Turkistani was slapped by one of the authorities of Balkh University while he was interviewing university students.

Kanishka stated: “During the interview, a person who was allegedly the security officer of the university, asked me harshly who I was and pulled my hand. Although I introduced myself to him as journalist, he asked me who had permitted me there and slapped me in my face.”



Kanishka says he had gone through all steps required for interviewing a university student and was in the university with full coordination in place.

After Kanishka was assaulted, a number of university students lodged a complaint with Balkh University Dean, Habibullah Habib, who refused to be interviewed by Media Watch.

However, Balkh governor spokesman Muneer Farhad says the dispute between Kanishka Turkistani and the university security officer was settled by the dean.

Kanisha insists that the issue has not been resolved completely since after the incident he, along with some other journalists, visited the dean, who blamed both Kanishka and the security officer for the incident.

A number of journalists in Balkh have complained about the lack of access to information in the province.

Kanishka also raised another issue. He said that journalists were invited to press conferences by some government officials - especially security officials – where they were given news materials, including video and audio prepared in advance. He believes this limits their reporting, and complained that in some cases journalists were not invited to news events.

“Although our security related problems are minimal, we need to commit self-censorship in some cases,” Kanishka said.

Manager of Rabia-e-Balkhi radio station in Balkh, Mubina Khairandesh, says: “Almost all journalists throughout Afghanistan, especially in Balkh province, commit self-censorship. Some journalists first try to censor the negative aspects of a story or a news item and then present it.”

Meanwhile, Balkh governor’s office spokesman Muneer Farhad dismissed journalists’ claim of videos sent to them by government officials, but admitted that in order to ease journalists’ work, security officials sometimes videotape security incidents and send them to the media because it is not practical that all media be present at sting operations. He said the choice to broadcast was up to the media.

Muneer added that Balkh is the only province where no limitations are imposed on media, and encouraged journalists to stop self-censorship.

However, Rabia-e-Balkhi manager Khairandesh said any film or news material provided by said parties is solely discretionary, and should not be used by independent media.

Meanwhile, Arezo TV station Najeebullah Paikan said his reporters have not yet faced such a situation, and he appreciated government cooperation with the media.

Media Watch strongly condemns the assault of journalists and calls upon government officials to identify and punish those who hinder journalists’ work.

These acts contribute to media self-censorship, results in hindrance of freedom of speech and the deprivation of the Afghan people from the right to access information set forth in Afghanistan’s Constitution.

Chief Editor of Ansar Weekly Beaten by Presidential Special Guard

Chief Editor of Ansar Weekly Jawad Sarwary claims to have been threatened and beaten by one of the Presidential guards at the entrance to Kabul Airport on February 2nd.

He said: “I went to the airport to write a story, but a number of soldiers standing at the entrance of the airport did not allow me through.”

“I approached the soldier to get permission, but as soon as I introduced myself as a journalist, he attacked me and punched me in the face.”

Sarwari explained that a national security officer and his colleagues prevented his arrest by those forces. He said that bystanders identified the person assaulting him as a member of the Presidential Guard.

Media Watch did not succeed in getting a reaction from the Presidential Office.

However, the Deputy Information and Culture Minister Mubariz Rashidi condemned the assault and said: “No individual or entity is authorized to behave harshly with a journalist who is on duty trying to get an interview. I therefore condemn the misconduct.”

Media Watch believes that threats and assaults of journalists by government officials is an ongoing issue in Afghanistan. Government officials do not understand the nature of media work, and such incidents increase this due to lack of follow up by relevant government authorities.

Security organs and the Afghan government are obliged by law to provide job and life security for journalists.

Correspondent of Noor TV Threatened by Police Chief of Jawzjan Province

Noor TV correspondent Haseeb Ahmad Hujati claims to have been threatened by General Abdul Aziz Ghairat, police chief of Jawzjan Province on January 23rd.

Hasib Ahmad Hujati says: “I wanted to interview the police chief of Jawzjan Province about the four policemen beheaded by the Taliban in Sarepol Province. During the interview, when I asked him about the reason for the policemen being decapitated by the Taliban, he became furious and broke my microphone and other equipment at the end of the interview.”

But General Abdul Aziz Ghairat says Hasib Hujati had not been threatened, and that his microphone had been broken by himself.

When asked whether he was frustrated with the journalist’s question about the beheading of the policemen, he said: “I assure you that no one has been beheaded and this wrongful question made me angry.”



Mr. Ghairat voiced his support to freedom of speech and democracy in Jawzjan Province and dismissed the allegations leveled by Hasib as a conspiracy against him.

Governor of Jawzjan Province, Mohammad Alem Saahi, considered the dispute a misunderstanding, and said the intention of the police chief was not to insult the journalist.

He encouraged journalists to refer directly to him when they face problems so that their problems are addressed.

However, Hasib says, after he was threatened by the police chief he attempted to interview the Jawzjan governor but was refused.

Governor Mohammad Alem Saahi apologized for not being able to meet the journalist and said he was too busy at that time.

Media Watch calls upon the Afghan government, and especially security officials, to emphasize to provincial officials to understand that asking questions is the right of Afghan citizens, and when journalists are concerned, asking questions is not only their right but an integral part of their profession.

Media Watch condemns the act of insulting a journalist and breaking his equipment by a senior government official and considers it an unlawful action.

Discussion about the Role of Media in the Evolution of Language at the Anniversary of Eqtidar-e-Milli Weekly

Addressing the ninth anniversary of Eqtidar-e-Milli Weekly, prominent writer and linguist Azam Rahnaward Zariab, raised an initial discussion about the role of media in evolution of language, saying that the media can play a critical role in the enrichment of a language. Criticizing the use of terms and choice of words in a number of media outlets, Zariab called for the correct use of grammar and professional writing by media. He said media can enrich or disable a language: “Media can play a very important impact on the nature of a language. This impact can be positive contributing to the enrichment of the language or negative disabling a language.”

The culture of free reading was also debated. Professor Mohammad Hussain Mohammadi of Ibne Sina Higher Education Institute, emphasized that the printing industry is either very weak or does not exist at all. According to him, political parties and NGOs that provide funding for printing are responsible for promoting a culture of free reading, and stressed the responsibility of the government and citizens to promote the culture of printing. Mohammadi said Afghanistan lacks a strategy for printing and publishing, and there are many short comes including a lack of coordination between writer, editor, printing house, designer and distribution.

Mr. Mohammadi said: “The lack of printing and publishing strategy does not mean the inexistence of printing houses in the country. Fortunately, we are not facing the problem of lack of printing houses; rather, our problem is the unregulated printing and publishing system.”

Media Watch believes that the improvement of language through the media, and the regulation of printing and publishing affairs in the country will only thrive when a new generation of talents is nurtured to engage in media and journalism-related work. On the other hand, Media Watch is of the opinion that journalism is essentially dependent on commitment and determination over and above diligence. This cannot be achieved unless media houses encourage talented youth and promote a culture of self-reliance and commitment.

Ministry of Information and Culture Advises TV Stations Not to Display Semi-Naked Pictures

The Ministry of Information and Culture issued a press release on February 17th requiring all TV stations of Afghanistan to avoid displaying semi-naked pictures in their programs.

The press release said that those media outlets that continue to display such pictures would be prosecuted.

Media analyst Daad Noorani said that the Ministry of Information and Culture should have clearly defined the limits for nudity before issuing the press release so the media houses could adhere to it.

According to Noorani, the government is not serious enough about such declarations, and he believes the government resorted to actions when under pressure by some individuals.

The manager of Tolo TV Mir Mohammad Sediq Ahamdzada said Tolo TV has never showed naked or semi-naked pictures since its establishment.

Ahamdzada said that although self-censorship is not good practice, Tolo TV blurs semi-naked pictures in songs and dramas.

Meanwhile Waheed Gharwal, a member of the Media Violations Commission of the Ministry of Information and Culture, said in some cases the pictures displayed by TV stations are inconsistent with Afghan cultural and traditional values, and many Afghan citizens are complaining.

Gharwal said that the press release issued by the Ministry of Information and Culture is by no means an action against freedom of speech.

Media Watch said that the display of semi-naked pictures by TV stations has negative impact on the society, but this does not mean that the government can use as a tool to impose self-censorship on media.

If the government is really serious about fight against immorality, this should include all types of immoralities and should start from inside the government.



Shenakht Weekly Established in Kabul

A new eight-page weekly named 'Shenakht' was established in Kabul.

Proprietor and editor-in-chief Ahmad Yosuf Eiraj told Media Watch that the weekly was established by a group of students in Kabul, with 2,000 copies printed.

Shenakht's content will be mainly investigative and critical focused on news, politics, sociology and ideology.

He said: "As we are currently in the initial phase, we are distributing our weekly only in Kabul; however, we will cover four northern provinces, for example, Baghlan, Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan next month."

Media Watch advises weekly and monthly publications to focus on news analysis because it has a longer shelf life to last a month.

Afghan Mass Media Law Analysis

Article 34:

The mass media and organizations set forth in article (27) of this law shall have a specific address, stamp and logo.

Analysis:

Despite physical distances, today human beings feel closer to each other more than any other era. Media play an important role in bringing people closer together virtually. The contemporary media expands the communication network between people in many ways and bridges gaps. Currently, the exchange of ideas and thoughts on a global scale is becoming increasingly visible, adding more dynamics to the current trend of globalization.

Despite the impacts and effects of globalization in our digital age, media still preserves indigenous and local values and brings them to a global level – a practice that keeps them distinguished and characterized with their own particular features.

The media should have their own distinguishing features just as they represent their particular indigenous values. In other words, media should distinguish itself from other media in national level on a legal perspective, and on the international level on an ethical perspective.

Such distinguishing marks ascertain the identity of the media on one hand and indicate their independence on the other hand. These markings can save media from imitation and strengthen their sense of self sufficiency and self reliance.

What has been referred to above is, indeed, the requirement for media to have their own specific stamp, logo and address. It should not be left unsaid that this article of the mass media law implicitly supports the intellectual property right in terms of having a logo and stamp. No media house can operate under the logo and stamp of another media outlet.

From a legal standpoint the logic behind specific stamps and logos is that they differentiate between media outlets, letting people easily distinguish one media institution from others. The identity of the media depends on its logo and stamp. In addition, it

eliminates the chances of misuse as no media will have the chance to misuse outputs or unlawfully harm another media and operate under the same stamp and logo, or damage the prestige or reputation of another media. Furthermore, each legal person should have its own address so that it is easily accessed in case of need. By having a specific address, media and other organizations set forth in article 27 can establish good relations with people as it will be easier for people to contact and cooperate with media.

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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.*
2. *Copy right is reserved for Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan,*