



Kabul, Afghanistan  
Position Paper  
Afghan Media

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A hard-won achievement in Afghanistan is at risk. Freedom of the press and expression have not only empowered a nation silenced under many suppressive regimes, but it has brought up an entire new generation with values of our time. The Afghan media is experiencing its most difficult year since 2002, with the Taliban directly targeting journalists and media professionals and senior members of the Afghan government find their interests in limiting freedom of the press. We call on the international community at the Brussels Conference to ensure that a setback of one single step in press freedom, a factor of progress and stability in Afghanistan, is unacceptable.

The Afghan media is a vibrant one in the region. It's more independent of censorship compared to any country bordering Afghanistan and even beyond. Today, 75 TV channels are on air and 100 more are licensed. Together with 240 radio stations and 300 publications, the media industry is one of the biggest employers in Afghanistan with more than 10,000 journalists and media professionals across the country. The media has been a pioneer of instrumental social change and a guardian of human rights. The media market in Afghanistan, however, turns over less than \$30 million USD annually, fifteen-fold smaller than Pakistan and 100-fold smaller than India.

Taliban vowed to target Afghanistan's leading TV channels in late 2015 and executed a deadly car bomb against a bus carrying members of TOLO TV, killing seven of their employees and seriously wounding 17 others on Jan 20, 2016. At least ten journalists and media employees were killed in the first half of 2016 alone, the deadliest period for media workers in the past 15 years. Media outlets, including Pajhwok Afghan News, Killid Group, 1TV, Shamshad TV and many more on a provincial level have received direct threats from the Taliban and the brutal Haqqani Network, demanding censorship of content, the broadcasting of Taliban ads, and doing embeds with the terror groups. The Taliban threats have given courage and excuses to many state and non-state hardliners to demand censorship such as limiting female anchors, imposing stricter Hijab codes, and reducing satire and frontline coverage.

The National Unity Government under President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah have not only failed to help improve the situation, but have contributed to limiting our freedom. The government has its own undefined definition of press freedom, which doesn't correlate with our practices of the past decade and half. In the peak of the summer fighting season, where an average of 40 members of the Afghan forces die a day, no minister in charge of any security institution has given interviews to Afghan media despite consistent requests. President Ghani signed the access to information bill in his first week in office, but like most other decrees, none of the 62 government institutions accountable under the act, have been cooperative.

While covering the battlefield, army commanders as high as the deputy army chief, block journalists and argue that the army's PR division provides information and footage to all media which should be broadcast and published, something that stands out against the very basic standards of journalism. In another move towards censorship, the National Security Council, chaired by President Ghani, banned drone cameras, an instrumental tool to cover events such as protests, flooding and sports. Journalists at the provincial level impose unprecedented self-censorship due to threats from local strongmen, government officials included. It was just in August when Afghanistan's main daily newspaper Sam published a blank page in its Herat edition, self-censoring an article on the provincial council head, fearing armed retaliation on its regional bureau and staffers.

Over 175 media outlets, mostly beyond Kabul, have been shut down for financial reasons in the past two years. The Afghan economy can hardly support limited media outlets and the economic downturn is also hampering our reach and quality and making Afghan media vulnerable to the black economy.

We, Afghan journalists and members of the Afghan media, call on all of you at the Brussels Conference to make the Afghan government more accountable in providing information, implementing laws and regulations to support free media and to ensure the safety of journalists. We also reiterate our calls to the international community to support Afghan media on the road to sustainability throughout the decade of transformation.

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