



The Major Barriers to Journalists in Contemporary Afghanistan

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Abstract

Journalism and the media sector in Afghanistan has experienced the exponential growth since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Today the Afghan Media sector consist in dozens of TV channels, around 200 radio stations, hundreds of printed publications and almost 6 million internet users, while during the Taliban reign there was virtually no media, except of a single radio station. Besides that, Afghanistan is still one of the insecure countries for journalists across the world. Access to information and lack of experience are other obstacles that reporters suffer. This study is mainly aimed to explore the major barriers to journalists in contemporary Afghanistan, hence around 20 journalists are interviewed across the country.

Keywords: Journalists; Media; Afghanistan; Barriers to Journalists

Introduction

Journalism in modern Afghanistan is growing along with many challenges. Journalists in the country operate in one of the world's most complex and contested information environments. At times, the lines between propaganda, espionage and journalism are blurred, and some journalists covering insurgent groups' activities have been accused of treachery or arrested, while others have been killed, kidnapped, beaten or harassed by the insurgent groups and sometime government.

In 2017, 21 journalists and media workers were killed, 23 wounded and 21 other were physically assaulted in Afghanistan. Insecurity and violence is not the only single challenge to Afghan journalists; access to information, lack of experience and many other obstacles that reporters are suffering from. This article is mainly aimed to discuss the major barriers to reporters in Afghanistan. The article relies mostly on primary data; 20 journalists were interviewed by an online questionnaire from Kabul, Nengerhar, Laghman, Khost, Paktia, Patika, Logar, Midan Wardak, Kandahar and Helmand provinces. Books, journal articles and media reports are used mostly as secondary data in the article.

The article begins with an overview to Afghan media and is followed by barriers to Afghan journalist, insecurity, access to information, lack of experience and lack of security and insurance respectively. At the end, it concluded by summarizing the major barriers to journalists in Afghanistan and some recommendations.

The Afghan Media

History of media and journalism in Afghanistan traced back to more than one and half century, the first news article called Shams-al-Nehar was initially published in 1873, but failed to develop because of the unstable political environment of that time in Afghanistan. Moreover, "Radio Kabul began broadcasting in 1925, which inaugurated a new era of mass media in the country and the first color television broadcasting appeared in 1978" [1]. After that, during the decades of civil war (1980s and 1990s) mass media severely destroyed.

During the Taliban regime in 1990s, media was characterized by strict media laws, including the banning of watching television and music. The only radio station broadcast religious programs and propaganda, but aired no music.

After the fall of the Taliban in the very beginning of the 2000s, restrictions on press in Afghanistan were gradually relaxed. Currently

alongside with other public infrastructure, mass media are tremendously developing; today the country has dozens of televisions stations, almost 200 FM radio stations, hundreds of printed publications, around 10 news agencies and more than 4 million of internet users. However, Afghan journalists have paid a high price for such progress. They are routinely beaten, intimidated, threatened and denied information by all sides in the war.

Barriers to Journalists

Although, since 2001, mass media in Afghanistan have played a crucial role in providing information, public awareness, reconstruction, fight against corruption, freedom of speech and human rights, media workers are still suffering from many challenges. Insecurity, violence, access to information, lack of experience and conservatism are the major barriers of media workers which are gathered from the interviews with journalists in Afghanistan.

The following parts of the essay explore main challenges and barriers:

Insecurity

It is one of the major challenges to media workers in Afghanistan. Last year (2017) was reported as the second deadly year for journalists and media in the history of Afghanistan. According to Nai report (a nongovernmental organization advocating for open media in Afghanistan) in 2017 "total 21 journalists and media workers were killed, 41 people were wounded, 21 journalists were beaten, 69 journalists threatened and insulted and taking away the freedom of 14 other journalists" [2].

Reporters particularly are at high risk when they report from the field of conflicts or to report some sensitive issues such as corruptions. Behind all these threats to Afghan journalists are all sides of the

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war. Moreover, according to Nai monthly report, in December 2017 “37% of violence was reported (committed?) by government officials and security guards. Out of 167 cases of violence, 62 of them were reported by government officials to reporters, including threats, insults, harassment, and denial of journalists freedoms. The 40% of the violence that affects journalists’ killings and wounds is reported by terrorist groups against journalists Of the 167 cases of violence in 2017, 62 of them were targeted by terrorist groups (Taliban, ISIS and the Haqqani Network)” [3]. One of the deadly recent incidents was on the 18th December 2017, terrorists carried out their attacks on the Afghan culture and the Afghan Voice News Agency. In that attack, 21 journalists and media workers were killed and 18 others were injured and the Islamic State terror group claimed responsibility for the attack. The Taliban and ISIS warned media organization several times not to promote immorality and foreign cultures and “anti-Islam” programs.

On the other hand, 20 out of the 20 responded journalists noted that insecurity is one of the major challenges in the line of field while reporting conflict and investigate some sensitive issues. Alam Jan is a journalist, works for Salaam Watandar national radio station in capital Kabul. He added “journalists are threatened by different armed groups. Inside the government, warlords themselves are a big threat while we report corruptions, extortion, kidnapping and investigate other sensitive issues.” Furthermore, he added “journalists cannot go to the areas under the control of the armed groups for reporting, it is highly risky.” Hilal Ershad is reporting for Kabul News TV channel from Khost province since 2016. He added, “The biggest threat is the armed groups, not the government. The government mostly protect us, in very rare cases the government official pose problem for journalists in terms of violence.”

Although Afghanistan is insecure for journalists and media workers, overall freedom of press and expression is improving in the country. Comparing to the neighboring countries, according to Reporter without Borders 2017 world freedom of press index, Afghanistan is ranked 120 out of 180 countries while in the same list India, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Iran are placed behind Afghanistan.

Access to information

Access to information is another challenge to journalists in Afghanistan. As indicated before, journalists are threaten by some government officials, Taliban, ISIS, some armed groups, insecurity and war, limited access to information, death and injury that make them less able to report events as truly as they should.

Access to information as natural right of citizens is guaranteed in article 50 of the Afghan Constitution and article 5 of Media Law. However, very unfortunately, such rights have been violated by the government, insurgents, foreign troops and irresponsible armed forces. Afghanistan is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and having a great law on article does not mean much if it is not implemented in practice.

Many of the respondents complain that limited access to information, in some cases affected their reporting credibility. In many cases when a journalist asks information from the government officials and is then subjected to verbal even physical harassment. Alam Jan added “the government officials deny to give information to the media and it is a violation of freedom of speech.” Moreover, some of the respondents addressed that the government officials also behave differently with journalists. “The Afghan government also behaves differently with national and international media outlets and journalists.

Although reporters from some countries have been restricted, in general government authorities and staff treat international media well” [4,5].

Lack of experience

Although media and freedom of press and freedom of expression remarkably developed since 2001 in Afghanistan, lack of experience and less proficiency still can be felt in the line of work field. Immaturity and unprofessional behaviour sometimes put journalists in troubles. In addition, Lack of experience itself is a challenge to Afghan journalists. This is due to the fact that free media is young and immature in the country. This challenge has caused print, sound and visual media personnel not to deliver what the citizens really need. Some reporters’ lack of basic information about media regulations and ethics caused them violate the ethics and media rights and defame real people, offend them and invade their privacy.

Lack of job security and insurance

Despite the remarkable increase of the media outlets since the last decade or so, journalists still do not have the work security and insurance. Generally, the work contracts are unjust and biased in favour of the media organizations.

Reporters and other media personnel are hired for low salaries. The work insurance is almost non-existence. Nearly 75 % of the respondents complained of the heavy workload with a low amount of salaries.

On the other hand, mostly the media owners and directors are trying to pursue their personal interests through their staff, and that affected professionalism in the work field.

Conclusion

As indicated before, media sector is tremendously developing in the country since last decade. In terms of quantity, there are dozens of TV channels, around 200 hundreds radio stations, hundreds of printed publication and around 4 million of internet users.

Despite this, Afghanistan has one of the most insecure and challenging environment in the world for journalists and media workers, and journalists paid a high price for such progress. They are routinely beaten, intimidated, threatened and denied information by all sides in the war. Only in the last 2017 year, totally 21 journalists and media workers were killed, 41 people were wounded, 21 journalists were beaten, 69 journalists threatened and insulted and taking away the freedom of 14 other journalists.

Limited access to information, immaturity, and lack of job security and insurance are the other major challenges to journalists in contemporary Afghanistan.

Recommendations

The government is responsible to implement and enforce media law and to follow up the media violation cases and prosecute the violators, so if the rule of law is implemented on one hand, and the behavior of the partisan media are observed on the other hand, it will create a fair environment for freedom of speech in the country, and the media system of Afghanistan will become a fair, free and responsible one.

If Afghan media want to play a role in development of the country, they must focus more on educational and training programs and they must use the inputs of professionals and experts in such fields.

Changing the system of a full free media to the system of free and

responsible one is another way of having a desirable system of media in the future of Afghanistan.

Keeping distance from decimation and reflecting the reality of the society, making constructive criticism of the government activities, staying focused on national interest and national security and creating a sound and competitive media environment can empower the government, which in turn will lead to the national unity and empower democracy and freedom of speech.

Increasing and promoting the capacity of human resources, attracting media professionals, and treating people with respect will

also help the media to create a sound and competitive environment in informing the public.

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