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Afghanistan Media: A Tragic End to the Golden Era

HEART OF ASIA SOCIETY

About HAS

The Heart of Asia Society (HAS) is an independent think tank working towards stability and shared prosperity in Afghanistan and the Heart of Asia region by fostering cooperation that increases connectivity and builds confidence across the region. The Heart of Asia region encompasses Afghanistan and its immediate and extended neighbors from South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

The Heart of Asia Society works through research, dialogue, and policy analysis and remains dedicated to a vision of Afghanistan that safeguards the rights of men and women of all ethnicities and religions, respects and values diversity, and promotes inclusivity and agency for its citizens. HAS also works with partners in Canada, the US, Europe, and the Pacific, urging them to remain engaged and advance peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan and the region.

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Introduction

Press freedom and an ever-increasing number of private media outlets were among the most significant gains of post-2001 Afghanistan. It marked the “golden era” for media, with hundreds of audio, visual, and print media outlets operating in Kabul and the provinces. In a short time, these outlets entered the homes of millions of Afghans and found their audiences among every layer of the population. It played a critical role in informing the public, fighting corruption, advocating for good governance, the rule of law, reform, and holding government institutions and officials accountable.

Afghanistan’s private media outlets reached unprecedented quality, maturity, and independence in two short decades compared to much of the regional media in that period. Due to its effectiveness and influence, the Afghan media embodied the standing of the fourth pillar of the state. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) indicated that 543 media outlets were present in Afghanistan before the collapse. And according to the previous government’s Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, about ten million Afghans had access to the internet and social networks, making information more accessible.

Remarkably, the industry played a prominent role in all aspects of public life and issues for the Afghan people. It served as an important public forum for social and political discussions. Having the necessary legal backing and the support of people, civil society, and international institutions, the media gave people a sense of control and power. With time, journalists’ and media outlets’ coverage of all issues including social, political, and security became more professional and critical for foreign outlets and audiences as the source of information. Radio and the numerous TV channels offered many entertainment programs, keeping their audiences entertained and informed. For many Afghans, TV, and radio provided much-needed entertainment.

Similarly, the thriving industry was also a crucial platform for the many young Afghans who reached fame for their important work. Some Afghan journalists received major awards for their work and became world-famous. Some even found themselves in the newsrooms of international media outlets.

However, since the collapse of the former republic on August 15, 2021, much of this progress is coming to a tragic end. In nearly eight months, the Taliban has reinstated many of the repressive policies that defined its extremist rule in the 1990s, dictating the new media landscape.

New estimates by national and international organizations suggest that the number of media outlets has slashed significantly since the Taliban takeover and freedom of the press is at its all-time low. On the World Press Freedom Index of Reporter Without Borders, Afghanistan dropped from 122 in 2021 to 156 in 2022.

Due to the problematic environment created by the Taliban, many journalists have fled the country, creating a massive vacuum in delivering information. Many journalists remain unemployed inside the country, either in hiding, or turning to other occupations to earn an income, including becoming street vendors. Most media organizations that are still active have been forced to adjust their productions and publications according to the directives of the Taliban and asked to disregard the laws and regulations of the past 20 years. Media organizations are either directly being censored by the Taliban or forced to self-censorship for their survival. Although the situation is more visible in Kabul, reportedly, it is more challenging for the media organizations and journalists in the provinces to do their job fairly and independently.¹

Even before the Taliban military takeover on August 15, Afghan journalists could only enter Taliban-held areas with explicit permission from the Taliban, and that too occasionally. The Taliban commanders threatened, detained, and killed journalists who were critical of the Taliban in their news coverage. That treatment has continued and become more widespread since the group's takeover.

Media Laws Suspended

Under the republic, the Access to Information Law and Mass Media Law was passed and enforced to regulate media activities, ensure free and easy access to information, place limits on freedom of expression, observe journalistic values, and urge constructive engagement between government institutions and the media. This was a joint effort of the government, civil society organizations, media organizations, and advocacy groups to ensure access to information and regulate the industry.

In addition to specific laws governing the functions of mass media, Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution also emphasized the protection of the right to freedom of expression and provided a solid legal base. The Taliban has suspended the Afghan Constitution since their takeover, practically eliminating people's right to freedom of expression and press.

Article 34 of the Constitution of Afghanistan states:

“Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations, and other means by provisions of this constitution. According to law provisions, every Afghan shall

have the right to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities. Directives related to the press, radio and television, publications, and other mass media shall be regulated.”²

However, the Taliban has sent multiple erratic messages since returning to power. Their authorities suspended all previous laws, including the Mass Media Law and the Access to Information Law. Without consulting relevant bodies, the de facto authorities issued a new set of restrictions. The Taliban media order³, issued by the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in November 2021, consists of eight articles, including banning movies and television dramas that violate “Sharia principals and Afghan traditions,” any Afghan or foreign movies that promote foreign culture and “propagate social immorality” should not be broadcast, banning any depiction of the Prophet Mohammad or other revered figures, satirical and entertainment shows that disrespect individuals are not allowed, television dramas that are in contradiction to Islamic values are not permitted, the showing of unclothed male bodies in videos and movies is not allowed to air, and ordering women news presenters to wear “Islamic hijab.” Lastly, television dramas that portray and depict Islamic religious figures are not allowed.

Christophe Deloire, the secretary-general of the Reporters Without Borders (RSF), stated that “decreed without any consultation with journalists, these new rules are spine chilling because of the coercive use that can be made of them, and they bode ill for the future of journalistic independence and pluralism in Afghanistan.” He called the measures “oppressive” and that they “open the way to tyranny and persecution.”

In another turn, in early February, during a meeting with the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee in Kabul, the Taliban spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, stated that their officials have studied the media law from the previous government and that they found “no flaws” and “shortcoming” in them⁴. In the same meeting, however, Mujahid stated that the “Islamic Emirate urges the media to consider national interests, Islamic values and national unity in their publications.” Taliban officials did not issue a statement confirming Mr. Mujahid’s words about the previous media laws.

These edicts and the arbitrary detentions, beatings, and killing of journalists occur despite the Taliban pledges too. In the Taliban’s first press conference after their military takeover of power, Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson of the group said that private media will “remain independent”, that they would “respect press freedom,” and that they were “committed to letting women work in accordance with the principles of Islam.”⁵ The group never explained what they mean by the “principles of Islam” in the context of media, human rights, and Afghan values and culture. In their first days, the Taliban spokesperson also stated that “no threat or reprisal will be carried out against

journalists” under the Taliban. Months later, the Taliban did not follow through with that rhetoric.

Taliban Crackdown on Journalists

The Taliban has continuously harassed, detained, and tortured dozens of journalists during the past few months, and the crackdown on media organizations has become a daily threat to the survival of a once-thriving media industry. In their February 4, 2022 report, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) stated that more than 50 journalists had been arrested and tortured in Afghanistan within the past few months. More recently, other reports put the number of tortured and detained reporters at 85.

Over the past month, three TOLONews presenters and a senior editor were arrested in Kabul. Earlier, the Taliban militias had detained and tortured several Etilaat-e-Roz reporters in Kabul, which has now shut down their print activities in the country. Furthermore, a Radio Nowruz reporter in Herat and local radio reporters in Kandahar were detained and interrogated. Muhib Jalili, a 1TV news presenter, said that he was tortured and was asked to present himself at Kabul’s Police headquarters for further investigations. In a recent Twitter Spaces conversation, he has also claimed that the Taliban has threatened his life and said that they hold the media responsible for their negative image among the population. Reporters of Ariana News, Pajhwok News Agency, and several freelance journalists have also been detained and beaten. Similarly, reporters in the provinces are facing an even harsher reality. The local Taliban officials call them “spies of the west,” and are being interrogated for even simple messages.

The Taliban continues to engage in silencing dissenting and even constructive critical voices in the media. After Professor Faizullah Jalal, a well-known political commentator and political analyst, Sayed Baqer Mohseni and several others who protested the Taliban’s actions were jailed and reportedly forced to pledge that they would remain silent in the future. Jalal and Mohsini did not speak again to the media after their release months ago.

Fazel Sancharaki, former deputy minister of information and culture for publication, says that by imposing such measures, the Taliban are gradually returning the country and media to their first period of ruling in the 1990s when there was no freedom of speech and media.

The Financial Crisis

Most media organizations in Afghanistan face acute financial challenges as most depended on the international community's aid. Many journalists have lost their jobs, and many have been forced to take up difficult jobs. Numerous examples of this have been widely shared on social media. On November 6, 2021, Muhammad Haroon Boromand, a private TV station employee, committed suicide due to poverty and unemployment. Some have become street vendors, and those who were forced to flee for their lives, are now jobless in other countries. Hamid Farhadi, an Afghan journalist who fled to Iran, says he has to work 13 hours every day for "small pay that is hard to survive on." Hamid Farhadi, a graduate of the Herat University's Faculty of Journalism, who for years worked with various Afghan media outlets, said he had no option but to leave for his safety.

A report jointly issued by Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC) and the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA) underlined that hundreds of male and female journalists have left the country since August last year and over 40% of media outlets (224 media outlets including TV channels, radio stations, news websites, and print publications) have shut down their operations due to funding shortage and imposed limitations. An additional 30% of media outlets stand on the brink of collapse, with limited daily or weekly operations.

In another report, The AFJC stated that local radio stations in Afghanistan are shutting down one after another due to the financial crisis. In the past few weeks alone, Maimana and Paktia Ghag radio stations closed their offices. Prior to this, Turkistan and Swash radio stations and RTA Faryab had been shut down. Local sources said that RTA's equipment was looted during the violent takeover of the country in Faryab.

Media advocacy groups say the situation has rapidly deteriorated following the fall of the republic. With much of the aid being suspended, limited operations, and slashed revenues from commercials, the salaries of those who are working have been reduced significantly. Some have not been paid for several months. The high electricity bills, challenges during the renewal of licenses, and tax penalties are among other pressing issues that have exacerbated the current crisis for media outlets. The continuation of the current situation, coupled with increasing violence and restrictions on journalists and the media, would result in a much smaller and state-controlled media community in the country, resulting in a greater vacuum of accurate information and leaving people with only limited and skewed sources.

Censorship

Recent developments have profoundly affected the media sector and freedom of expression. Afghanistan is now experiencing an authoritarian media system characterized by censorship, repression, and violence against journalists. The Taliban government's Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) ordered the media to stop broadcasting any foreign TV drama shows and movies on the Afghan TV channels.

In the past two decades, the broadcast of Turkish and Indian TV dramas was part of the daily schedule of TV channels. The Taliban say that the Indian and Turkish movies and TV dramas popular in Afghanistan are against "Islamic sharia law and the traditions of Afghan society."

Furthermore, the managing director of Tamadon TV, a Shiite community-affiliated TV station, said that the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) had also banned the broadcasting of foreign Television dramas with Islamic and Shiite content. Since the Taliban's ban, no TV station has broadcasted their foreign shows. The ban has left the media outlets searching for new content to fill their daily schedules and the Afghan public deprived of the only entertainment they had.

A journalist currently working in Kabul who spoke with the Heart of Asia Society on the condition of anonymity said that the Taliban even interfere in the news content of the media outlets. They "dictate the content that should or should not be published." In another restricting move, even the online activities of journalists and social media users have been watched and if not to the taste of the Taliban, journalists are being detained and interrogated. They cannot publish facts critical of the Taliban, fearing worse consequences. Hundreds of active, critical, and influential social media users, including writers, journalists, and civil society activists, have deleted their social media accounts or censored themselves to avoid persecution. The Taliban's intelligence agency (GDI) monitors the media, journalists, and even social media users.

The Taliban does not allow the media to cover security incidents and does not allow journalists and people to film or take photographs of a crime scene or any other actions of the Taliban deemed critical. In a recent case, on April 19, two schools in western Kabul were bombed, killing and injuring dozens of students. The Taliban put the death toll at six, but locals claim that 126 people were killed in the two attacks. The Taliban did not allow reporters who had gone to the scene to cover the attacks. The Taliban also did not allow school teachers to film or photograph the aftermath of this terrorist attack. In addition to bans and restrictions on traditional media, the Taliban recently banned Tiktok and Pubg applications.

Imposing Restrictions on Women Journalists

As a consequence of the Taliban taking over Afghanistan, women journalists have been among those who have suffered the most. Rahimullah Samandar, President of the Afghanistan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA), said that more than 95% of women journalists have lost their jobs or resigned during the early days of the Taliban's return to power. Women disappearing from the media is getting worse by the day. He added that just a handful of women journalists have continued to show up to work. Those who wished to continue working were forced to quit by their employers.

A TOLONews reporter in Kabul said that the Taliban has imposed severe restrictions on the women staff at this media organization, including segregating male and female workers' offices and a ban on male and female colleagues traveling in the same vehicle. Women are also asked to dress up more conservatively and in "accordance with Sharia." The dining hall of the organization has been segregated too. However, Saad Mohseni, CEO of the Moby Media Group that owns TOLONews, has told Bloomberg that TOLONews' female employees have increased after the fall of Afghanistan.

According to the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) report, published on March 8, out of the 1300 women working in the media, only 300 are still employed. The rest have either fled the country or lost their jobs.

For example, in a directive shared with media organizations, the Taliban's local administration in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan banned women journalists, effectively banning their voices and appearance on TV. Despite the directive, some have continued to go to work.

Kulthum (not her real name), a private media outlet's presenter in Kabul, said that despite the Taliban's harsh restrictions, she appears on the screen and presents the news. However, she adds that she can only do this by adhering to the imposed conditions, including wearing a particular type of hijab, acceptable to the Taliban.

Major Reduction in the Number of Media Workers

The environment for media companies has become highly repressive, which can only be seen in autocratic regimes. An Afghan reporter from a prominent media outlet in Kabul, who spoke with the Heart of Asia Society on the condition of anonymity, said that before the fall of the republic, this media company had close to 3000 employees, which

has now been reduced to only 600. Many of them are new hires, lacking experience. A majority of the organization's former staff were evacuated last year.

Fahim Rasa, an Afghan journalist, shared his frustration that the mass exodus of journalists has created a massive vacuum in reporting facts. "It is impossible to obtain first-hand information for journalists working from exile," he says. This problem has been more acute inside Afghanistan. Media outlets do not enjoy access to information anymore. The media outlets which used to fact-check and publish authentic stories and facts have now fallen prey to fake news, rumors, and Facebook misinformation.

The Taliban guard their inner workings and government affairs as confidential information and aren't providing necessary information to the media and the public. To record, interview, film, or cover events, the media outlets must obtain official permission from Zabihullah Mujahid, the IEA spokesperson.

The Taliban is more cautious with foreign journalists, giving them access to information and privileges that local journalists cannot have. This strategy of the Taliban is only aimed at appeasing foreign journalists to portray a better picture of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

Broadcast Ban on International Media

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) confirms that the Taliban recently informed local Afghan media networks to stop broadcasting foreign news media programs, including news bulletins. As a result, four news bulletins produced by international media have been blocked.

These include the BBC's news bulletins in Pashto, Persian, Uzbek, Voice of America programs, and DW's programs. In collaboration, these channels could broadcast their news through national outlets to their audiences.

The ban on the broadcast of international media programs has further exacerbated the financial crisis of the local media companies. Global media had informal contracts with Tolo, Ariana, Shamshad, and 1TV, which agreed to provide financial support to the local media to broadcast their programs. With the ban in place, that support is cut off too. A managing director of one of the major television channels in Kabul conveyed to the Heart of Asia Society that they are currently weighing their options if they can continue to operate under such circumstances.

Investigative Reports

During the past 20 years, investigative reporting had become a critical part of the media work in Afghanistan. Some of the many critical issues that investigative reporters covered were exposing corruption and drug trafficking, uncovering Taliban violence and land grabbers, holding authorities accountable, and human rights and women's rights violations.

With the Taliban's return to power, Afghan investigative reporters have no access to information and do not dare to publish reports on issues that are critical of the Taliban. With the current vacuum created by the Taliban's control and crackdown, and as the natural resources are being mined and plundered, the investigative journalists neither have the resources to investigate nor dare to publish their work.

The Taliban is less likely to give interviews and information to local media outlets, and if they uncover the Taliban involvement, the reporter is at risk of detention or death. As a result, much remains unreported under the Taliban.

State media outlets as an alternative to private media

Under the republic, state-owned media competed with the private media. Often, state-owned media outlets did not have an audience, but after the Taliban returned to power, the public does not have much to choose from. State-owned media has become relevant for many reasons, including its announcement of the new rulings of the Taliban.

Bakhtar News Agency, National Radio and Television of Afghanistan (RTA), nunn.asia, etc., are popular Taliban-affiliated media outlets. The private news agencies receive the Taliban-related news from RTA and Bakhtar News Agency and publish what the government-affiliated outlets share. As an example, Bakhtar News Agency had 3000 followers on Twitter before August. That number has now increased to nearly 90,000 followers. An employee of this news agency told the Heart of Asia Society that the agency's audience is growing and their colleagues are busier than ever.

The fate of the Afghan newspapers

Popular Afghan newspapers, such as Hasht-e Subh, Etilaatroz, Mandegar, etc., have closed their offices in Kabul and no longer produce print editions. They have transitioned to only online publications. A majority of the employees of these newspapers fled the country and are working from abroad.

The editor-in-chief of one of the newspapers said that “over the past seven months, we have been engaging with the Taliban to secure some guarantees, but those efforts were futile. That’s why we decided to close our office and focus on our online output.”

On the other hand, popular state-owned daily newspapers have become weekly, including Anis, Hewad, and Islah. The number of employees of these three historical newspapers has also been reduced.

Conclusion

The Taliban is tightening its grip on private media and are introducing strict directives for media operations. They send precise and direct instructions on the types of news, programs, and content allowed to be aired or published. Journalists and their organizations are reportedly under constant surveillance, effectively controlling messaging and information to the people and not allowing the world to know about their actions. More importantly, journalists continue to be detained, interrogated, and beaten. Hundreds of media organizations have been closed down and much of the Taliban activities, including arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killing, remain unreported. Media organizations still operating must appease and contend with Taliban officials trying to control and close independent media organizations inside the country. However, the Taliban is also desperate to project a positive message by allowing the private media to continue their activities. While this strategy seems to have worked over the past few months, it is unlikely to succeed in the long term.

Given the Taliban’s repressive measures so far, the survival of a free and independent media built with Afghans’ hard work and international allies is at stake. Experienced reporters have either fled the country or currently live in hiding, and many still hope to leave Afghanistan. The regional, western, and Taliban-affiliated media outlets have replaced the local media outlets, losing independence and providing skewed information to the public. To escape the consequences of critical reporting, local media is forced to soften their messaging and news coverage, losing their credibility and peoples’ trust. Subsequently, by closing the space to a fair and independent press,

countries like China⁷ have been eager to help the Taliban expand the state media operation into influencing further and manipulating the public.

Should the censorship of the media and humiliation and torture of media workers continue at its current speed, coupled with severe financial and economic crises, it will result in the tragic end of the golden age of freedom of expression and media. With the continued surveillance of the Taliban, it would not be surprising if most Afghan media outlets shut down in the near future, returning Afghanistan to the 1990s – when the Taliban banned all media operations.

During their first time in power, only “Shariat Radio” station, broadcasting the regime’s religious programs and official edicts was allowed. Today, in interviews with employees of some major news organizations, the most emphatic and influential media outlets are preparing to leave. They are waiting to either be asked by the Taliban to close or are waiting to secure funding to open operations outside the country. In either case, media organizations are closing due to the problematic environment created by the Taliban. With such predictable and dramatic closures of media organizations, the golden age of freedom of expression and media in Afghanistan is tragically ending.

Endnotes

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