

Afghan Press Freedom Under Taliban

By Shukria Bayan

From a secret location, Mustafa Behin reports anonymously on women's lives in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. It is dangerous work. He has received threatening letters from the Taliban, abusive comments on his social media from their supporters, and been forced to live in hiding and write under different names.

"Saya is one of my fake names that my stories are published with," said Behin.

In the wake of their takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban have issued a code of conduct for the media consisting of 11 articles, one of which placed stringent limitations on press freedom. Media outlets must now avoid publishing any material that is deemed incompatible with Islamic principles, insults national values, or has not been officially approved by the Taliban.

The Taliban views numerous media outlets and journalists as being linked to the previous Afghan republic's government, and as a result, it has exerted various forms of pressure on them, particularly when reporting on domestic issues. These novel regulations for the media have caused confusion among journalists. Since then, the country's media landscape has undergone a significant shift.

Many reporters have left Afghanistan because of concerns for their safety, leaving fewer active media outlets. Among those that remain, many cannot report freely because of restrictions imposed by the Taliban.

Of the 532 media outlets in Afghanistan, only 312 are currently active, and most of these cannot report critically on the Taliban. Local authorities controlled by the Taliban have required journalists to obtain their approval before publishing their reports, leading to the limited coverage of certain topics. The scope of reporting allowed is also limited, with journalists focused primarily on topics related to unemployment and poverty.

Some journalists have chosen to comply with these rules and present a picture of Afghanistan that aligns with the Taliban's perspective. Affiliated with state-run media or outlets that have been allowed to operate under the Taliban's rule, they typically present a sanitized view of the country, highlighting the positive aspects of the Taliban's governance while downplaying or omitting the issues and challenges.

Journalists who continue to report the truth have to do so anonymously, given the risks associated with reporting stories critical of the Taliban's rule. These journalists face censorship, harassment and even the threat of violence from the Taliban, making it difficult for them to

operate freely. As a result, they have to rely on anonymous sources, who also fear repercussions for speaking out.

Journalists who follow the Taliban's regulations say they find it easier to obtain information and sources, as they are allowed to use official Taliban sources and numbers without facing censorship or backlash.

However, journalists who prioritize reporting the truth face a significant challenge in verifying the accuracy of the information they receive from the Taliban, given the potential for propaganda or misinformation. In addition, they may face difficulties in accessing alternative sources of information and witnesses, as many people may be hesitant to speak out or share information that could put their safety at risk.

Therefore, journalists who prioritize the truth must use critical thinking and rigorous fact-checking methods to verify the accuracy of the information they receive. This may require cross-referencing multiple sources and conducting thorough investigations. While this approach may be more time-consuming and challenging, it is essential to maintaining journalistic integrity and ensuring that the public has access to accurate and trustworthy information.

This divide in the media landscape in Afghanistan highlights the difficult situation in which journalists find themselves: having to choose between presenting a favorable view of the Taliban's rule or reporting the truth at great risk to themselves and their sources. It also underscores the importance of upholding the principles of press freedom and protecting journalists' rights to report the truth, without fear of retaliation or persecution.

The Taliban have a well-documented history of suppressing the voices of women and denying them basic rights and freedoms. They often avoid addressing women's issues or trivialize them, preferring to maintain a patriarchal and conservative approach to society.

Those who seek to raise women's voices may face significant obstacles and, in some cases, may even be considered criminal. The Taliban's oppressive and repressive policies toward women brought severe limitations on their ability to participate in society, including access to education, employment and political representation.

Thus, speaking up for women's rights in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is a risky and dangerous endeavor. Behin is aware of the risks, but he remains committed to speaking out for them and shedding light on their struggles.

To protect himself, he has adopted various measures, including going out in different clothing and avoiding carrying any journalistic equipment or a smartphone. However, there was one time where he did take his smartphone with him and pointed out the challenges he faces in trying to remain both safe and effective in his advocacy.

Behin had intended to write an article about two important issues: the increase in targeted killings, and the situation of a woman who had been prevented from working and had given her kiosk to a man to run.

While speaking to a shopkeeper about these issues, he was interrupted by someone calling him from behind, who turned out to be a member of the Taliban who demanded his smartphone. Behin refused to hand it over. Another Taliban member forcibly took the phone from Behin, discovering a report about homeless women who had been sexually assaulted by Taliban. The Taliban member slapped Behin's right ear and accused him of being a spy and defaming the Mujahidin (those who fight for Islam). The force of the blow caused Behin's eardrum to rupture, resulting in immediate bleeding

“It wasn’t the first time I have been beaten by the Taliban for being a journalist -- many times” he said. “When a bomb attack took place at a high school in Kabul, I was in the area and tried to cover the suicide attack. A Taliban soldier not only didn’t allow me to cover it but also slapped me on my face.”

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