



The State of Media Freedom in Afghanistan on the Eve of May 3rd World Press Freedom Day

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In 1991, UNESCO adopted a resolution titled "Strengthening Media Freedom in the World," urging the United Nations to designate May 3rd as World Press Freedom Day. At the 48th session of the United Nations on December 20, 1993, this day was officially designated as Press Freedom Day, commemorating the anniversary of the "Windhoek Declaration," which aimed to enhance the status of independent and inclusive African publications.

Since then, international organizations focusing on freedom of expression and media, along with independent analysts, have been monitoring various situations regarding freedom of expression and media globally as a fundamental human right, grounded in democratic values across different nations.

This year, Afghanistan mourns May 3rd in a distressing situation where media freedom, for the third consecutive year, is under threat, and the circle of pressure, censorship, and restrictions tightens day by day. Afghanistan experienced a golden era of freedom of expression and media, civil society, and democracy from 2001 to 2021, during which media plurality and its informative role thrived in many provinces and districts across the country. The principle of freedom of speech and media was entrenched as a social contract, earning the trust and confidence of the Afghan people.

During the 1990s, the media gradually recognized the imperative of adhering to truth, accuracy, timeliness, originality, ethics, and laws to survive. In recent years, efforts to strengthen journalistic ethics, uphold professional standards, and rebuild trust have intensified. The Afghan media community endeavored to establish an independent and professional media landscape as the fourth pillar of the nascent democracy.

However, with the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, everything changed, and the shackles of repression once again gripped the free media. The main challenge lies in the

tightening circle of restrictions and the imposition of harsher constraints.

Over the past three years, censorship and tyrannical behavior towards media freedom have escalated. Initially, concerns arose about the impact of increasing restrictions and barriers on the formal, technical, economic, and structural aspects of the media, particularly for women journalists. However, economic challenges at both national and local levels led to the closure of media outlets reliant on financial resources. Journalists faced threats, arrests, abductions, and even fatalities, or were compelled to flee the country. The growing censorship, from banning music and other entertainment programs to pressuring women wearing half-face veils, exemplifies these challenges. Nearly a year ago, restrictions were imposed on media content production. Under these new restrictions and censorship, the ruling group dictates what the media should convey and reporters' narratives, including how individuals should be portrayed and addressed. Restricting and banning media content constitutes a direct assault on media freedom. The absence of written laws or procedures regarding these restrictions exacerbates the anguish.

One of the tangible victims of this ambiguous and imaginary situation is Habibur Rahman Taseer, a Radio Azadi reporter in Ghazni province. He was arrested by Taliban intelligence on April 17, 2024, reportedly on charges of blasphemy. Yet, what constitutes offensive behavior remains unclear. The absence of an active commission for journalists' and media violations, along with the lack of police, court, defense attorneys, and other legal channels capable of enforcing specific regulations or laws in this realm, compounds the issue.

In summary, over the past two and half years, amidst the gap in legal monitoring structures and legal recourse for media attacks:

- In total, 250 media outlets have been shut down.
- Many journalists have been detained by Taliban who four of them are still in the prison. One is accused of a crime related to journalism, while the others seem to be imprisoned on criminal charges.
- More than 300 journalists have been threatened, tortured, and humiliated.
- Two journalists have been killed which their deaths are not related to their journalistic work.

Even journalists who have fled the country face dire circumstances. Those exiled to Pakistan, Iran, and several other regional countries grapple with the absence of legal residency documents, living under constant threat of deportation and insecurity upon return. They lack employment, income sources, and housing, contending with severe economic hardships.

Immigrant journalists residing in Western countries encounter their own challenges. While they benefit from relative safety and protection under Western governments compared to their counterparts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, they struggle with cultural and language barriers in their host countries. They question whether they will be able to practice their profession or not.

Notably, some Afghan journalists in Western countries are gradually establishing professional networks, and efforts are underway to form Afghan media in exile, aiming to improve conditions for fellow journalists in exile. If these structures can garner support from commercial media and international institutions, they could break the chains of censorship and restrictions hindering Afghan citizens' right to freedom of expression in their homeland and covering their

stories.

On May 3, 2024, the people of Afghanistan mark the third year of World Press Freedom Day, yet this occasion is overshadowed by fear and despair. The dark reality of this situation is the deepening and pervasive sense of crisis that grips our nation with each passing day.

The Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization (AJSO), alongside other organizations and independent Afghan journalists, endeavors to provide a glimmer of hope, albeit small, for Afghan journalists. We strive to foster an alternative media space. Although media activity within the country remains essential and impactful, the severity of restrictions and censorship precludes meaningful engagement abroad. Educating and nurturing the media community based on the values of civil society for the future is a paramount objective that the AJSO is committed to, with the aspiration of witnessing a flourishing media community upon the restoration of democracy.

Happy May 3rd, International Press Freedom Day, to all journalists worldwide, especially Afghan journalists.

Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization (AJSO)

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