AjSO
Afghanistan Journalists
Support Organization

Access to Information in Afghanistan :

Current Challenges and Realities

2024

Following the collapse of the Republic government on August 15, 2021, significant rights and freedoms, notably the right to access to information, freedom of expression and the press, were severely compromised. Since the beginning of Taliban rule, there has been a systematic effort to restrict media activities. Numerous media outlets have been shut down due to these restrictions, censorship, and the economic difficulties caused by the new regime. The few remaining active media outlets suffer from increasing limitations and censorship on a daily basis. The restrictions on female journalists have escalated to outright bans, while journalists face persecution, torture, exile, threats, and imprisonment.

More concerning, however, is the elimination of the public's and journalists' right to access accurate information. The Taliban have employed three primary methods to control public opinion and the collective mindset: strict censorship, dissemination of filtered propaganda, and poisoning the public sphere with disinformation.

Under the previous Republic government, Afghanistan had a well-established law that ensured access to information, obligating all institutions to provide information to the media as per the law. The Taliban not only sidelined this access to information law but have also not developed any written guidelines or frameworks to provide information to the media and the public. They exploit this legal vacuum to impose their will on the media.

Based on detailed incidents documented in the following three areas, we can identify the specific violations and barriers to accessing information:

1. **Censorship**: The Taliban's special agencies exert strict control over information and media content. No media outlet can publish anything on significant issues without coordination with these designated agencies. Currently, the Taliban employ three types of censorship in Afghanistan:

    - **Pre-collection and dissemination censorship**: The Taliban have already sent letters to media offices in the capital and provinces, establishing red lines for journalists and other media workers. No media outlet or journalist is allowed to work on subjects deemed contrary to Taliban rule or critical of their authority.

- **Censorship during information collection**: Journalists and media workers are prohibited from publishing information without the Taliban's approval. When Taliban spokespersons or officials from the provincial departments of information and culture share information with journalists, they deliberately withhold information that may portray them negatively. They also explicitly instruct journalists on what can and cannot be published.

- **Post-publication censorship**: The Taliban have established special units within the intelligence directorate, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Information and Culture, and the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice to monitor the media. These units track daily news, reports, programs, commercials, and even media signals and promos. Information contrary to the Taliban's policies or that challenges their authority is flagged, and actions are taken against the media outlets that publish such content. The Taliban summon media managers or specific journalists to their offices, demanding the removal of published information and threatening them with consequences for future infractions.

2. **Propaganda**: The Taliban disseminate misleading or biased information to influence public opinion. Exaggerated and embellished propaganda about economic projects and security is prevalent, while the actual security situation is deteriorating. Targeted killings, particularly of former national armed forces members, continue, and attacks by ISIS and other armed groups occur frequently. However, these issues are obscured by propaganda promoting a false sense of security. Moreover, there is no visible improvement in the economic situation; hunger, poverty, unemployment, and oppressive taxes increasingly burden the populace. The Taliban exploit religious sentiments for their propaganda, giving it a religious facade.

3. **Information Control and Surveillance**: The Taliban intimidate the media, dictating which information can be published. After numerous attacks, the media do not have access to accurate casualty figures. When information is finally released, often long after the event has lost newsworthiness, only the details provided by the Taliban are permitted for publication.

4. **Disinformation**: The Taliban deliberately disseminate false information across various domains to mislead public opinion. They frequently attribute the killings of former soldiers to personal disputes and blame many mysterious murders and acts of torture on unidentified armed groups. Reports of violence and torture against women, which eyewitnesses attribute to the Taliban, are often dismissed by the group as domestic conflicts or personal enmities.

5. **Media Manipulation:** The ruling group exercises control over media content and often manipulates it to serve their interests. They make stereotypical statements about women's and civil society protests, portraying them as foreign-driven actions, and claim that those involved are merely seeking opportunities to leave the country. Furthermore, based on accurate information, the Taliban have recruited individuals for financial compensation to promote propaganda in their favor on media platforms and social networks. These individuals, who number in the hundreds according to some estimates, often operate multiple fake identities, with some male users posing as women using female names and photos. It is noteworthy that similar accounts are employed not only by the Taliban but also by other political or ethnic groups, personalities, and military factions to propagate negative and destructive propaganda against their opponents. There have also been instances of the Taliban using the names of prominent figures, including female journalists, parliament members, and other well-known personalities, for propaganda purposes, spreading disrespectful messages against others while promoting the Taliban's image. They are particularly

active on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and especially X (formerly Twitter). These paid anonymous propaganda accounts engage in the following violations:

5.1. **Character Assassination**: The Taliban systematically tarnish the reputations of key figures from the former Republic government, their political and military opponents, intellectuals, women, nationalists, civil activists, and journalists. They spread false accusations to defame those who fled the country after the fall, unable to live under Taliban oppression.

5.2. **Defamation**: Taliban-affiliated propaganda accounts level fabricated accusations against their opponents, intending to damage their personal reputations through misleading or false statements. Notably, these reports often involve Taliban-detained journalists or civil activists being accused of moral crimes, portraying their arrests as criminal rather than political.

5.3. **Smear Campaign**: The ruling group's defamatory actions are part of coordinated efforts to undermine the reputation and credibility of their opponents. This includes making public the private lives and homes of some opponents.

5.4. **Verbal Abuse**: Individuals hired by the Taliban for propaganda purposes use derogatory language against their opponents. They hurl insults and label any Afghan who does not align with their ideology as infidels. These Taliban-linked propaganda accounts extensively use offensive language and accusations of apostasy against their intellectual opponents.

5.5. **Hate Speech**: The Taliban incite public hatred against their political, religious, and ethnic opponents through their media and propagan?da channels. They stir up animosity against Salafis, Hezb-e Islami, Shia citizens, former Republic

government employees, and civil activists. They also exploit the exile of Afghans by the Taliban through propaganda rumors and even repeatedly broadcast old videos and shocking images to intimidate the public.

Overall, in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, no principles of media ethics or lawful media conduct are observed. No media professionals understand their authority, rights, and responsibilities because no specific law is in place. The major issue is that the Taliban approach all these issues based on Sharia law, which lacks specific or contracted codes concerning the media, allowing interpretations that serve the ruling group's interests.

The Afghanistan Journalists Support Organization (AJSO) calls upon all international professional institutions, media organizations, and partner entities to address these issues by initiating specific discussions and identifying measures to prevent further distortion and confusion of Afghan public opinion. We recommend specialized and professional attention to these serious threats and challenges in Afghanistan's media and civil society sectors throughout 2024, ensuring that Afghans have access to accurate information and preventing further victimization of specific individuals or institutions.

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