

## **Afghan Journalist's Death Sentence Political**

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Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh's real offence may have been to have a brother whose frank reporting has exposed abuses in northern Afghanistan.

The roar of international protest has increased over the past week since a court in northern Afghanistan handed down the death sentence to Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh, a young journalism student convicted of blasphemy.

In Afghanistan, meanwhile, analysts and media rights advocates say the harsh sentence was delivered at the behest of powerful local figures, as an indirect form of retribution against Kambakhsh's brother, Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim, a reporter who has written extensively on human rights abuses in the north.

Sentence was passed at a summary hearing held by the lower court for Balkh region on January 22, at which Kambakhsh was offered no chance to speak, and had no legal representation. (See **Afghan Reporter Sentenced to Death for Blasphemy**, ARR No. 280, 22-Jan-08.)

Kambakhsh denies committing the offence of blasphemy and totally rejects the allegations that led to his detention in October. He is accused of downloading an article from the internet which reportedly contained a critical commentary on the Koran. The piece was circulated at Balkh University, and attributed to Kambakhsh.

The authorities claim they have a signed confession which forms the basis for the death sentence.

The young reporter told IWPR that he was coerced by the National Directorate of Security, NDS, into admitting his guilt.

"I was held in a small room which was very dirty," he told IWPR. "I was held in that room for eight days, and the security guys were constantly coming to see me. They interrogated me several times a day, and told me they were going to hang me. They told me to prepare myself for death.

"I had no contact with my family, and I was under a lot of psychological pressure. On the eighth day, the NDS officer came with a piece of paper in his hand. He told me to write that I had downloaded the document from the internet and that I had added several sentences to it. They told me that if I wrote this, they would release me."

Khalilurrahman Adli, the judge who heads the public security branch of the Balkh court that sentenced Kambakhsh, insisted the defendant had been treated fairly.

"We had other evidence as well," he told IWPR. "In addition to circulating that document, he had anti-Islamic texts on his mobile phone."

At Balkh University, 16 students and lecturers signed a document condemning Kambakhsh's behavior and describing his allegedly "anti-Islamic" behaviour.

"All of the testimony is in his dossier; you can study it," said Adli.

Kambakhsh's brother Ibrahim, who is a staff reporter for IWPR, bristles at such allegations.

"He may have had some jokes on his phone, something harmless about girls," he said angrily. "As for the testimony of his classmates - well, you can get anybody to say anything you want."

Despite the alacrity with which the trial was concluded, no one seems eager for the death penalty to be carried out.

"This is the primary court, he has a long way to go," said Adli. "There are other steps, and [Kambakhsh] can defend himself. That is his legal right."

Afghanistan's Ministry of Information and Culture also issued a statement emphasising that the verdict was not final.

About the only ones calling for Kambakhsh's death are the Taleban, who carried a virulent attack on the young man on their website, [alemarah.org](http://alemarah.org).

Condemning Kambakhsh's "dirty statement," the Taleban called on "jihadi and brave Afghans to administer severe chastisement to the perpetrator of this action."

Kambakhsh's brother has been outspoken about his arrest and imprisonment. From the outset, Ibrahimy has been convinced that the real target of the action was his own reporting.

"I have recently written several reports from the northern provinces about powerful men who were abusing people's rights," he told IWPR. "These men can create any kind of plot they wish - they have influence over all classes of people. They want to punish me in this way."

Ibrahimy's reporting has touched on the interests of "warlords" - local political figures from the former armed factions whose rising power has made life increasingly difficult in the north. He has been frequently threatened, his home and office have been searched, and he has been forced into hiding.

Adli denied that the court was bowing to political pressure.

"The court made its decision on the basis of sharia [Islamic law] and the law of the country. We did not act on anyone's orders," he told IWPR.

Rahimullah Samander, head of the Afghan Independent Journalists' Association, corroborates Ibrahimy's assessment.

"When [Kambakhsh] was arrested, IWPR's offices in Mazar were searched by the NDS, and [Ibrahimy's] notebooks were taken, which contained contact numbers for the sources in his stories," he said. "This clearly indicates that the government's problem was with Yaqub Ibrahimy, not with Parwez Kambakhsh. But they could not arrest Yaqub. This was a good way of pressuring Yaqub and his family."

If additional proof were needed, added Samander, one need only consider the position taken by religious scholars around the country. The Ulema or clerical councils of Balkh and Kunduz provinces have issued condemnations of Kambakhsh. Others have remained silent.

"Why have only the Ulema in Balkh and Kunduz been provoked?" he asked. "It is all due to jihadi [faction] connections. The judges and the prosecutors of Balkh all belong to a specific party, and the administration up there is a dictatorship that abuses its religious and governmental power."

Fazel Rahman Ori, editor of the Erada daily newspaper and a Kabul-based political analyst, also sees political manoeuvring behind the scenes.

"The central government is weak, and governors have their own administrations," he said. "[Local political figures] want to get revenge on Parwez Kambakhsh and his family by exercising their power. It also serves as a lesson to other journalists."

### **Hafizullah Gardesh is IWPR's local editor in Kabul.**

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