

Afghan Journalists Under Fire

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Government professes to respect freedom of expression, but journalists tell a different story.

When Ahmadullah Mohammadyar, a freelance journalist in Kandahar, decided to attend a rally during the presidential election campaign last summer, he did not expect to run into trouble from the local authorities.

But as Mohammadyar was talking to the crowd about Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, one of the more prominent challengers to the incumbent, Hamed Karzai, he claims he was attacked by police.

“With government officials present as well as a dozen other journalists, [they] took me outside and started to beat me. They hit me with their weapons and kicked and punched me so much that I could not even stand up,” he said.

Kandahar, in Afghanistan’s southern Pashtun belt, is Karzai country. The head of the provincial council is Karzai’s half-brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai. Journalists in Kandahar have long complained that the authorities keep a firm grip on the media, stifling freedom of expression.

“Kandahar is a dictatorship,” Mohammadyar said. “Officials will only allow publication of things that are acceptable to them. If there are facts that cast officials in a bad light, they will not let us publish.”

Mohammadyar said that he has been threatened many times.

“The news on the radio in Kandahar is not what journalists report, it is what officials want the news to be,” he continued. “If a journalist does something that is not in favour of the government, even if it is in accordance with the principles of journalism, then he becomes an enemy, and has to be beaten, killed, or driven out of Kandahar.”

The Kandahar authorities deny Mohammadyar’s claims that news is heavily censored and journalists are targeted. However, they did admit that police beat Mohammadyar.

“There is no dictatorship in Kandahar,” Abdul Majid Babai, the head of Kandahar’s information and culture department, said. “At the time that Mohammadayar was attacked we were in the middle of our fall poetry festival, the Anaar Gul (Pomegranate Flower).”

“The governor had declared that there should be no political campaigning during this time. We know Mohammadyar. He is a good poet. But he started campaigning for Ashraf Ghani. So yes, the police beat him. That was a mistake. Our police are not very well trained.”

Mohammadyar’s case is not an isolated one, according to journalists’ rights organisations.

“This year (the Afghan solar year begins in March) has been worse than previous years,” said Wahidullah Tawhidi, who heads Media Watch, a newsletter that documents cases of violations against journalists.

According to Tawhidi, the Media Watch office has recorded 71 cases since March, 2009. These include three murders, 37 arrests and/or beatings, and ten cases of threats received by phone.

Fahim Dashty, spokesperson for the National Union of Journalists and editor of Kabul Weekly, confirms that the current year has been a bad one.

“Without a doubt, this year has been worse for journalists than any other,” he said. “Security officials have failed to perform their duties. They try to hide reality by creating problems for journalists. Journalists have more problems with the government than with the insurgency.”

Dashty accused officials in the ministry of information and culture, which oversees the media, of failing to take action to protect journalists.

Hamid Naseri Wardag, a spokesman for the ministry, acknowledges that journalists are under threat. But he insists that his ministry has been active in trying to address the problem.

“We have held meetings with security officials in the capital and provinces about journalist safety,” he

said. "We have sent many letters about journalists' safety to security officials."

His ministry, he said, was discharging its duties, and it was now up to security officials to take measures.

At the same time, journalists are facing threats from insurgents, who are often displeased by what they see as pro-government coverage. Several journalists are currently in hiding after their lives were threatened by persons claiming to represent the Taliban.

Nonetheless, journalists say, the main threat is from their own authorities.

Mahmood Fayez, a reporter from the Kabul-based Tamadon TV, was arrested and beaten in Kabul in October, while on his way to a news conference at the ministry of foreign affairs.

"Suddenly the police took my camera and started to beat me," he said. "I told the commander not to let his men abuse me like that, but he attacked me as well. The police treat journalists like this because we expose their crimes. They do not want the public to know the reality."

If nothing is done to stop such abuse, Fayez said, many journalists will abandon their profession. Some have already been forced to leave their places of work and residence and seek refuge in the capital.

Sher Ahmad Haidar was a journalist for the Pajhwok news agency in Ghazni. "I had to leave and move my family to Kabul," he said. "My life was being threatened."

Interior ministry spokesman Zmarai Bashari accepts that police do occasionally act inappropriately towards journalists, but he insisted that all such cases were investigated and the culprits punished.

Regarding the case of Fayez, Bashari conceded that the police were at fault.

"We went to this reporter from Tamadon and apologised," he said. "We gave him a sheep in accordance with Afghan culture."

Police officials implicated in the abuse of journalists in Kabul and Kandahar have either been imprisoned or transferred, he added.

But Bashari also asked that journalists cooperate with the police. "Police sacrifice themselves to protect journalists," he said. "Journalists should also cooperate with the police."

Political analyst and writer Ahmad Saeedi dismisses government talk about freedom of speech and the rights of journalists as so much propaganda.

"The government has made no arrests of anyone accused of killing journalists," he pointed out. "They have not conducted proper investigations. They create problems and obstacles for journalists."

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