

Afghan Media Challenge

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The international community and the new Kabul administration face an uphill struggle to transform the Afghan media.

Efforts to revive Afghanistan's moribund media will require significant financial investment and a determined commitment to ending the intimidation of journalists and their employers.

The new Afghan administration has pledged to overhaul the press and the United Nations is currently engaged in consultations aimed at devising initiatives to support the process, as part of post-war reconstruction efforts.

Afghan analysts warn, however, that the task is fraught with problems and challenges and could take many years to achieve.

After a quarter century of civil conflict, the media has been reduced, like so much else of the country, to ruins. Newspaper premises and broadcasting stations have been destroyed and many journalists are in exile - those who remain lack basic skills or are employed as propagandists for the country's various political and tribal factions.

The Afghan minister for information and culture, Makhdoom Raheen, estimates that just twenty per cent of the media continues to function. He says many of the printing presses have been burned down and only a handful of magazines, newspapers and radio stations still operate; the two leading daily titles, *Anees* (Companion) and *Hewad* (Homeland), are limited to publishing once a week.

The need to rebuild a media infrastructure from the bottom up is clearly evident. When asked recently by journalists what the country needed from the international community in order to develop the media, Raheen replied, "almost everything".

Western proposals have included the possible provision of a 500 million US dollar satellite channel, a 30 million dollar grant to launch Radio Free Afghanistan and a package of measures to put the print media back on its feet. The latter is likely to include the setting up of printing presses in Kabul, Herat, Mazar and Jalalabad.

But besides material reconstruction, there remains a problem of finding and training journalists to staff the new outlets.

Prime minister Hamid Karzai has said that his new government would make it a priority to defend press freedoms. Already, harsh Seventies legislation banning independent media has been junked. In its place, new, progressive press laws have been introduced as part of the Bonn agreement signed in December.

But many exiled journalists are reluctant to return concerned that Karzai's word means little in a country still riddled by armed factions.

A change of regime counts for little in itself among many Afghans. While the new government promises to be non-partisan, the country is still very much divided between the various factions who helped topple the

Taleban.

"There's no way we can move back there," said a prominent Afghan journalist in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. "Apart from Karzai all you have is a bunch of armed illiterates and we are afraid to work in such a gun culture."

One sign of optimism is that some of the hundreds of journalists who fled to Pakistan during the years of conflict have built up what the Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ, has described as the closest thing to an independent Afghan press, including two news agencies, which feed reasonably credible news bulletins to Western wire services, and an Afghan-owned daily newspaper.

The trouble is that those journalists still working in Afghanistan are either ill-equipped to do so or are merely mouthpieces for the various political factions. "Our thoughts and views have been restricted over a long period," said one journalist, "and we need to re-learn the culture of press freedom."

There is also the question of re-opening doors for female journalists. Besides a brief period under Soviet occupation when they were actively encouraged to work in the media, the profession has traditionally been male-dominated. The situation is not expected to change much in the short-term at least.

Many Afghan journalists argue that it's all very well for the government to introduce media reforms, but unless real progress is made in establishing an independent media sector, with its own institutions, publishing houses, broadcasters and unions, little will change.

The international community could clearly help in this regard by ensuring that a significant proportion of the funds earmarked for media development are channelled into the non-state sector. This, of course, will have to go hand in hand with a real commitment by the new authorities to ensure that journalists are able to work free from intimidation and violence.

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