

Afghan TV Station Clashes with Prosecutor

Author: IWPR

The prosecutor general and the country's most popular television station are engaged in an ugly standoff that could be a very bad sign for the media.

A conflict between Afghanistan's chief prosecutor and Tolo TV, the country's most popular television station, has raised fears that media freedom is being eroded.

After journalists from the station were detained and hauled off to the prosecutor's office, it is Tolo TV that is being forced to apologise, under threat of prosecution.

The latest clash between the media and the government has provoked public outrage – but this is directed more against Tolo than at the authorities. This has some observers wondering whether democracy is developing just a bit too quickly for the average person in Afghanistan.

It started with a television broadcast on the evening of April 17, when Prosecutor General Abdul Jabar Sabet was shown giving a speech to parliament in which he lambasted the country's judiciary. The clip selected was, according to Sabet, misleading and distorted the true sense of what he was saying.

He settled on a fairly radical solution, sending armed men to escort the news editor and two other staff members of Tolo TV to his office.

What happened next is unclear. Some reports said the journalists were beaten, and they were shown on television looking dishevelled after their encounter with the police and attorney general. Reporters say that some had bruises on their arms and backs.

But before they were released, they all signed statements saying that they had no complaints against the police or the prosecutor.

The television then began its own campaign against Sabet. It showed numerous reports that highlighted unflattering incidents from his biography, including his past as an associate of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the rogue warrior now labelled a terrorist by the United States government. It also alleged that Sabet had received land and a house from the government.

Sabet appealed to the media commission, a government body headed by Information and Culture Minister Karim Khuram. The commission's decision, delivered on April 22, was that Tolo should apologise for its behaviour, while Sabet was not to be punished for his actions.

Several demonstrations occurred throughout the country, some supporting Sabet and others Tolo V. The television station has so far refused to issue an apology, saying that all of its broadcasts were within the bounds of journalistic standards and ethics.

"We have documents that support our reporting," said Mohammad Abdullah, legal advisor to Tolo TV. "We sent these documents to the Supreme Court and the media commission."

Tolo, which was begun with assistance from the United States in 2004 by the Afghan-Australian Mohseni brothers, has been at the cutting edge since its inception.

Its news programmes are widely valued for their accuracy and comprehensive coverage. The station also serves up a blend of Bollywood films, music videos and satire, along with the tremendously popular “Afghan Star” modelled on “American Idol.”

But it has offended many who feel that it violates Afghan cultural values. The parliament, made up of staunchly conservative elements, has repeatedly sought to place sanctions on the station for its “un-Islamic” programming.

Now Tolo is under attack from those who think that it has taken sides in a growing political debate that pits the Pashtun majority against the members of the former “Northern Alliance” – a collection of fighters who battled the Soviet occupation, then went on to wage a bloody civil war among themselves until they were chased out of much of the country by the Taleban in the mid-Nineties.

The scars from those years run deep, and many Pashtuns feel that they being unfairly pilloried by media dominated by members of other ethnic groups.

Mohammad Abdullah, legal advisor to Tolo TV, denies the accusation that the station is partisan.

“It is absolutely untrue that we are taking sides,” he said. “We are very careful about balance, accuracy and fairness in our news. And we do not pick on one group – everyone complains about Tolo.”

Many have said that Tolo crosses the boundaries of what is acceptable in Afghanistan.

“Tolo is not broadcasting in accordance with our culture,” said political analyst Fazel Rahman Oria.

Nor is there a shortage of ordinary people who dislike Tolo’s irreverent attitude.

“Tolo is against Islam,” said Mohammad Rahim, 35, a Kabul resident. “The prosecutor did a very good thing. Tolo is always insulting famous people. It goes completely against our culture. When I wake up at 4:30 in the morning and turn on the television, I want to hear a reading of the Koran or other religious programmes. But Tolo is dancing at that time.”

Another Kabul resident, Rahmin Karimyar, agreed. “If Tolo had no mistake with the news, why they were afraid to go to the prosecutor general’s office?” he said. “Most of Tolo’s programmes are against the government, against the regime. It’s okay that we have freedom of speech, but that does not mean that you can say anything you want.”

Despite such grumblings, Tolo has quickly become the most watched station in the country, according to

numerous polls.

This popularity has made it an attractive vehicle for those with a message, according to Oria. He believes political factions such as the recently-created Jabhe-Motahed-e-Milli (National Unity Front) are trying to use Tolo as a wedge against the government.

“Tolo is being manipulated by Jabhe-Milli,” he said. “They want to remove Sabet because he may make trouble for them. Tolo is the best way for them to do that.”

Oria believes Tolo has targeted Sabet unfairly, saying, “They abandoned journalistic principles and started attacking Sabet from the moment he began his work.”

But Oria also condemned Sabet’s use of force against Tolo, even though he was provoked.

“Sending police to Tolo and arresting them was also against the law,” he said. “Sabet should use only legal methods.”

The case has highlighted concerns that media freedom is slowly being chipped away in Afghanistan.

A new law being debated in parliament may increase government controls over journalists.

“The law is generally good, but it does contain some dangerous things,” said Rahimullah Samander, head of the Committee to Protect Afghan Journalists. “In particular, Article 33 states that the media must be careful to respect Afghan nationality, they cannot use swear words, they cannot insult people, libel them, and so on. But there are no definitions for these things.”

If passed, the bill would also place limitations on private television stations. Programming could be censored, and they would be required to include Islamic programming in their daily schedules.

“We are worried because the fundamentalists, the mujahedin, are the majority in the parliament,” said Samander. “They do not want freedom of the press, and they do not want the press to publish anything negative about their activities, about what they did in the past and are still doing. They just want the press to be under their control.”

Samander said that with journalists under attack in parliament, in the government, and, increasingly, from the revived Taleban, media outlets are beginning to seek protection elsewhere - leading to bias.

“I am worried about journalism in Afghanistan,” he said. “Most publications and media organisations are now starting to work for specific sides. They are losing their objectivity, and if things continue this way Afghanistan’s media will lose the trust of the people and of the international community.”

Journalists face a growing array of problems, he said, foremost among them interference from armed

groups.

“Everywhere is controlled by the gun,” said Samander. “But the government’s reaction to journalists is also very bad. They do not know what journalists are – for them, journalists are spies.”

Nor do the soldiers of the international forces deployed in Afghanistan respect the media. “The Coalition forces and NATO make problems,” he said. “Many times they have taken cameras and recorders, and only given them back after erasing everything.”

The number of abuses against journalists is growing yearly, he added. “In 2004, we had 34 cases of violations against journalists,” he said. “In 2005, the number grew to 50. So far in 2007, we have already had 20. These included killings, beatings, arrests and warnings.”

Oria agrees that Afghan journalists face a host of problems.

“Afghan journalists are sleeping on a bed of thorns,” he said. “Passing the new law will just increase the number of thorns.”

But for many ordinary Afghans, the doings of the government and the media are of little concern.

“Don’t ask me about Sabet and Tolo,” said Kabul resident Zare, 75. “I haven’t had my lunch yet. Can they give me lunch?”

“Whatever they’re doing is up to them. I have to have a job and find food for my family. What Tolo and the prosecutor general get up to is not my business.”

Wahidullah Amani is an IWPR staff reporter in Kabul.

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