

Afghanistan: Sept '09

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Press freedom campaigners hail IWPR's "lead role" in reporting the case of Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh.

September marked a major event for IWPR: Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh, a young journalism student who spent nearly two years in prison for downloading information about women's position within Islam from the Internet, was finally freed. The welcome event came quietly, hidden from the Afghan public and much of the media, so as not to inflame public opinion during the delicate post-election period (See article **Kambakhsh Freed.**)

Kambakhsh is the brother of veteran IWPR journalist Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim, who believes that his brother's incarceration was the government's way of punishing Yaqub for his fearless reporting about corruption, warlordism, and other social ills in northern Afghanistan.

IWPR had followed the case closely, and became an information resource for much of the rest of the media. Programme director Jean MacKenzie commented frequently on the case for media outlets as diverse as the National Interest, the Washington Post, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, as well as documenting the trial and other legal developments for the IWPR website.

Kambakhsh, in his first comment for publication since his release, told IWPR, "I saw very strong media support for my case but I know IWPR started coverage of my case internationally and followed it until the end. I really appreciate IWPR and the rest of the media and organisations that defend journalists. You declared worldwide that an innocent person had been punished. As just one small member of the media, I am really grateful."

Unfortunately, Yaqub left the country in the wake of his brother's release. It was a great loss for IWPR and for Afghan journalism, and a sad testament to the status of Afghan journalists in the deteriorating political and security situation in Afghanistan today.

IWPR, following its brief to focus on censorship and repression of the media, covered the two-year-long case comprehensively, reporting on developments at least a dozen times.

To campaigners for journalists' rights, the Kambakhsh case was a rare glimmer of hope and IWPR's role was key. Bob Dietz, Asia Programme Coordinator at the Committee to Protect Journalists, told IWPR, "The Kambakhsh story is one of the few successes that we have had out of Afghanistan, where pressure is mounting daily on journalists. IWPR played a lead role in reporting his case, and its coverage has to be considered a fundamental factor in the international response that led to this young man's release."

Another group that defends journalists, Reporters Without Borders, also welcomed Kambakhsh's release.

"We hail Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh's release with deep emotion," Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Jean-François Julliard said in a statement. "After being held for nearly two years, he now needs to be able to rebuild his life. We pay tribute to all the free speech activists in Afghanistan and abroad who never stopped defending his innocence and pressing for his release."

The case of Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh became an international cause celebre involving heads of state, top diplomats, and human rights organisations. Finally, in the wake of Afghanistan's contentious August 20 presidential elections, President Hamed Karzai made good on pledges to a range of figures from Condoleezza Rice to Kambakhsh's immediate family, and issued a pardon.

Kambakhsh was arrested in October 2007 in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. The charges against him involved downloading controversial materials on women's position in Islam from the internet and distributing them to his classmates at Balkh University.

Kambakhsh denies the allegations, despite a confession he signed during the early days of his incarceration, when he was held incommunicado by the security services. He claims he was subjected to intense interrogation and even torture, although physical abuse could not be substantiated because of the period of time that elapsed between the alleged beatings and medical examination.

Kambakhsh was condemned to death in a closed court session in January, 2008.

The 20 months that followed were agony for Kambakhsh and his family. Ibrahim tried for months to find a qualified lawyer and get the case moved to Kabul, where the family felt they would get a fairer trial.

The case that unfolded in the Kabul Appellate Court during the summer months of 2008 was regarded as a travesty by Kambakhsh's supporters. It was adjourned several times, once for medical expertise following Kambakhsh's allegations of torture, once to summon witnesses, other times for no stated reason at all.

In October 2008, the Appellate Court commuted Kambakhsh's sentence to 20 years in prison. The actual criminal charges were unclear: he was accused of heresy, which is not in the penal code.

The case has been stalled for nearly a year. The diplomatic community intensified its pressure after Afghanistan's Supreme Court upheld the 20-year sentence in March, but the looming elections put a brake on attempts to free the young man.

Ahead of the poll, Karzai was thought to be courting the ultra-conservative mullahs, most of whom would have been happy to see Kambakhsh put to death.

Then, just days after the August elections, he issued the pardon that everyone had been waiting for.

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