

## **Free Press Prospects Bleak**

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The government may be committed to establishing an independent media, but huge obstacles stand in the way.

Afghanistan's new interim government is committed to establishing a free press on the principle that without it, democracy is impossible. Ministers are talking about it but so far have made little progress, not surprisingly in view of the immense obstacles.

The problems they face include the fact few Afghans can afford to buy newspapers; roads are too poor for effective distribution; there are no local advertisers; and few foreign investors are interested in backing local media ventures.

Add to this the fact that the Mujahedin and subsequently the Taleban were so opposed to the media in the early years of their rule that they destroyed many of the country's printing presses, and it's clear that virtually no other country would find it so hard to start a free press.

Despite all this, the interim government has passed a new media law permitting the establishment of independent papers provided their owners clearly identify their nationality, their interests and their sources of funding and undertake not to print any material that Muslims might find offensive.

The reason the authorities have set such tough prerequisites stems from their concerns that warlords might use papers to promote their own causes. But those seeking to set up genuinely independent titles fear such conditions could be used against them were they to fall out with the authorities.

But the new media law and its shortcomings are practically an irrelevance given the other factors working against a free press. Twenty-three years of conflict created a war culture, which left little enthusiasm for reading, never mind writing. Even literate young men from the cities now think guns are more useful than books or newspapers in the quest for money and a good life.

The government's commitment to freedom of speech stems from the constitution of 1963, a relatively peaceful time in Afghanistan's history, which became known as the decade of democracy. In this period, there was a vibrant press with a number of left and right-wing publications.

But they were subject to censorship. The government of the day did nothing to create a truly free press; nor did successive administrations.

Last year's Bonn conference, which set up the interim government, stipulated that the 1963 constitution should be taken as a model along with its free speech commitment.

When the Taleban came to power, they at first clamped down on the media but later realised they needed it in some form. They used to print two daily papers called Anis and Hewad, both of very poor quality. They also permitted a number of weeklies, including Tholo-e-afghan in Kandahar and Baidar in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Following the Taleban collapse, Hewad and Anis are being printed twice a week along with a weekly paper in Kabul. There is also an independent paper funded partly by UNESCO and partly by the international

journalists' organisation Reporters Sans Frontiers.

And since the Mujahedin and the student militia did their level best to destroy them, there are only a handful of printing presses left. Meanwhile, radio and television, banned under the Taleban, have had to start up news operations from scratch.

Moreover, the fragile composition of the interim government, consisting largely of leaders representing warring tribal factions, is not conducive to the ideal of press freedom.

State newspapers are issued free, but ministers do not like to see them used for criticism and journalists are allowed to work on condition they write nothing to harm the government hierarchy.

Those seeking press freedom complain that although the world is ready to spend four and half billion US dollars for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, not a penny has been spent on promoting an independent media. They say that without it there can be no modern democratic state and all international funds spent on trying to achieve that goal will have been wasted.

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**Location:** [Afghanistan](#)

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