

IWPR Reporter Under Attack in Afghan North

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Journalist Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim says his brother Parwez has been jailed and threatened with death because of his own reporting on human rights violations in the north.

A leading journalist in northern Afghanistan says his brother has been imprisoned on false charges as a way of pressuring him not to write articles critical of local officials and strongmen.

Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim has come under mounting pressure himself, with security service officers visiting his home and anonymous phone calls threatening his life.

His brother, Sayed Parwez Kambakhsh, has been in prison since October 27 on charges of writing and distributing anti-Islamic literature, which he denies have any foundation.

An Afghan journalists' rights union has condemned a decision to have Parwez's case heard by clerics rather than in the conventional judicial system. A council of Muslim scholars has recommended the death sentence.

For the past four years, Yaqub has been reporting for IWPR on Afghanistan's northern region. During that time, he has consistently covered issues of extreme sensitivity, such as continuing abuses by strongmen who maintain paramilitary forces and undermine the rule of law in defiance of the central government's disarmament efforts.

In the past two months, he has published several reports which identify factions and individuals in the north whom local residents accuse of crimes and brutality.

"The people who are threatening me had nothing official against me," he explained. "There was nothing they could use to arrest and imprison me."

Instead, he says, they targeted his younger brother, who is a journalism student at Balkh University in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, and also reports for the local daily Jahan-e-Naw.

The charges against him are based on a document downloaded in mid-October from the internet and circulated among students at the university where he is studying. He says that the name "Sayed Parwez" was added to the document after it was printed out, and that he had no involvement with it.

Parwez has no previous record of trouble with the authorities.

He was arrested by the state authorities, in the shape of the National Directorate of Security, NDS, and under normal circumstances, a criminal offence would have gone to court and a judge would have ruled on the matter.

But instead, the charges against Parwez have been referred to the Shura-ye Ulema or Council of Religious Scholars for Balkh region, which is recommending that he be executed by hanging on the grounds of apostasy.

It is unclear what level of evidence the council sought or obtained to substantiate the charges. Nor is it clear what its death penalty recommendation means in legal terms.

Yaqub is convinced that his brother has been targeted as part of a growing pattern of intimidation that he sees as a reaction to his revelations about the power of certain political and paramilitary factions in the north.

Since Parwez's arrest, Yaqub has faced harassment from the security services, who have searched his home and office, accessed his computer files, and tried to force him to reveal sources on several stories Yaqub has published with IWPR.

Yaqub's fearless reporting work has meant he is no stranger to controversy, but his brother's arrest has marked a clear hardening in pressure placed on him.

"I have repeatedly been threatened during my work with IWPR," said Yaqub in a telephone interview from Mazar-e-Sharif. "I write about human rights violations in the north, and about fighting between various factions. This is my profession, and I have ignored the threats and gone on with my career.

"But recently the pressure has increased."

Yaqub has received anonymous death threats over the phone and via the internet. He has been followed, and security officials have come to his home late in the evening to ask for him, as a result of which he has gone into hiding.

In one phone call, the voice told him, "We know who you are, we know where you are and we are going to kill you."

When NDS officers arrested Parwez, they also sealed Yaqub's office, which contained all of his documents and files.

"On October 28 they did a thorough search of my rooms," said Yaqub. "They checked my computer. Why would they do that? They also checked my notebooks which have contact numbers for my sources in the provinces.

"They read copies of all my articles for IWPR, and they wanted to take my notebooks with them. But I told them, 'You have come to find out about anti-Islamic articles, but my notebook has nothing to do with that.' I told them, 'If you take my notebook I will complain in the media.' They began to whisper to each other and then they gave me back my notebook."

The police did confiscate some articles that Yaqub had downloaded from the internet about women's

rights, plus “The Story of Civilisation” by Will Durant.

Parwez’s plight has attracted the attention of civil society groups and human rights activists.

Zia Bomya, chair of the Journalists’ Defence Committee in Kabul, told IWPR his organisation was following the case closely.

“A number of individuals and circles whose interests are being threatened want to initiate a conspiracy against Parwez,” he said.

Bomya recommended that formal judicial institutions investigate the roots of the case.

In his view, the Council of Religious Scholars has no legal standing to rule on such a matter.

“As long as the constitution and the courts exist in Afghanistan, the Shura-ye-Ulema is not authorised to pass sentence on anyone,” he said.

“This is clear interference in the affairs of other institutions. Parwez’s case should be submitted to the [government] commission which assesses media violations, which can then transfer it to the judicial agencies. Any other decision on the case is illegal, and we condemn it.”

Farid Hamidi, spokesman for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, agreed that the judiciary and no one else was entitled to pass judgment.

“Our branch in Mazar is following this case,” he said. “All of these things have to be done in accordance with the law and the constitution. Institutions like the [lower] courts and the Supreme Court must handle them; it is their job.”

Nasir, who is also studying journalism at Balkh University, told IWPR that he understood there was a conspiracy against his fellow-student.

“Parwez is one of the top students in the class, and he is friendly to everyone. But there are people who harbour some enmity against him. When the state attorney [prosecutor] came to see us, some people spread negative propaganda about Parwez, but most of us know the truth.”

Yaqub is convinced that Parwez is the victim of a concerted campaign to silence him as a journalist.

“Some of my friends, whom I don’t want to name, have told me that a number of high-ranking officials are involved in this case,” said Yaqub.

“They say that I am trying to defame the north by writing such reports, that I have started a campaign against commanders in the north and that I must be kept down.

“They are taking it out on Parwez.”

Yaqub added that the affair has already had an impact on his reporting, “When all this started, I had to give up writing about certain themes. It was too dangerous.”

Jean MacKenzie is IWPR programme director in Afghanistan.

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