

## **The Journalist Known as Ghor's Voice**

**Author:** [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

IWPR contributor praised for fearless work exposing corruption and abuses.

The province of Ghor, in the west of Afghanistan, is a hard place to be a journalist.

One of Afghanistan's most underdeveloped provinces, some remote areas are ruled by armed groups and entirely out of government control. Women's rights and access to education are in a dire condition, while corruption amongst local officials means that the entire school system is near collapse.

For investigative journalist and IWPR contributor Mohammad Hassan Hakimi, this makes his work all the more important.

"The only powers that can resist cruelty, injustice, fraud and dictatorship and that can help its victims are the media and journalists," said the 31-year-old father of four, whose work focuses on human rights abuses and government corruption.

For a six-month investigation last year looking at how girls and women were being sold into marriage in return for cows and sheep, he travelled to some of Ghor's most remote districts, interviewing dozens of tribal elders as well as militia commanders.

(See [Afghanistan: Sold for a Herd of Cows](#)).

For another 2016 piece, he spoke to women's rights activists who were furious after a 60-year-old Afghan cleric married a six-year-old girl.

(See also [Afghanistan: Outrage at Marriage of Six-Year-Old Girl](#)).

"I have received threats so serious that I've been sure I was going to die," he said. "It gives me nightmares. But when I wake up, I say to myself that I will continue with my work."

Hakimi said that his interest in journalism began while he was still at school. It was in the ninth grade at the Sultan Alauddin Ghori high school that he launched his first activist group, named the Youths of the Country Civil Organisation.

His first practical experience of journalism was with a private radio, Sada-e Adalat, in Ghor province.

"I was very critical in my youth and felt I had to speak out against wrongdoing whenever I saw it," he said. "So I was imprisoned twice by local Ghor officials after I started working with the radio and civil society organisations."

After university, where he studied social sciences, Hakimi joined his first IWPR training in 2011.

"I have to say that writing investigative reports for IWPR opened the door to a world of journalism for me," he said. "Right now the only thing I am sure about is that I will stay an investigative reporter for the rest of my life."

In his first investigation for IWPR in 2012, Hakimi looked at Ghor's dysfunctional education system, in which the local government continued to pay salaries to absentee staff and many children went through the system without attending school or passing any tests.

(See [Afghanistan: The Ghost Teachers of Ghor](#)).

Although action was taken and a number of officials fired as a result, when he revisited the topic in 2016 he found out that the overwhelming majority of schools in the province remained closed.

(See [Afghanistan: Ghor's Education System Near Collapse](#)).

Hakimi said that local officials sometimes posed more of a threat to his work than the armed opposition.

"The insurgents have made death threats against me, but the government officials who favor democracy and are paid by our nation behave worse than they do towards the media and civil society activists. They try to silence the voice of justice and block people's rights - I have been imprisoned several times because I have revealed their shortcomings."

Munir Mehraban, IWPR's investigative reporting editor, said Hakimi was someone very special.

“His courage and risk taking have surprised me. One of his skills is discovering corruption and this depends on his formal and informal relations with local people. He has a great reputation in Ghor and is very influential. One or two people might say that they know the governor of Ghor if you ask them, but everyone knows [Hakimi] if you ask them. They call him ‘the voice of Ghor’.”

Hakimi has also been part of IWPR’s debate programme, giving ordinary citizens a public platform to put difficult questions to government officials and activists.

He said, “People are so very familiar with IWPR in Ghor that I doubt any other organisation could be so popular. Local people have found the institute’s debates are very educational.”

As well as writing for IWPR, Hakimi freelances for other Afghan outlets and is the chief editor of local publication 21 Monthly.

Human rights organisations have also praised his work, including the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and he has represented Afghan journalists at conferences in London and Tokyo.

He currently serves as an elected representative of the National Union of Journalists of Afghanistan as well as heading the Ghor branch of the Independent Journalists’ Organisation of Afghanistan.

Despite his often harsh criticism of government officials, Hakimi’s work has been recognised by the Afghan parliament and the Ghor provincial council as well as the governor and other local officials.

Laughing, Hakimi said, “It is achievement enough for me that the governor of Ghor has told his administrative officers to work properly ‘or I will tell Hakimi about you’.”

What makes his efforts worthwhile is when he sees concrete changes made as a result of his work.

He recalled how a local man had sought his help after his daughter married a man belonging to another tribe. His relatives and the district governor wanted to expel this man from the district for breaking with tradition.

“I immediately prepared a report about this case and publicised it in the media,” Hakimi said. “The authorities in Kabul heard about it and warned local officials to stop such acts. As a result, that man stayed in his district.”

On another occasion, a video story he made about a gang rape helped lead to a court case.

“A local militia commander and five of his men had raped a nomad woman,” he continued. “The nomads set a protest tent in central Ghor, but no one paid attention. I made a video of this and prepared a report, and when it was broadcast the security forces arrested that commander and his men. They were all tried and sentenced to between five and 15 years imprisonment.”

And the trust he has inspired in the local people of Ghor is another source of strength, he said.

“When I walk in the city or villages, all the people know me and welcome me warmly. They wish me long life or for Allah to keep me safe. They tell me, ‘Hakimi, you are the defender of our rights and rights of the poor.’ These words give me an unimaginable amount of energy.”

The journalist said that he was particularly proud that he had never accepted any of the many dozens of bribes and gifts he had been offered during his years of work.

But work has taken a toll on Hakimi’s personal life.

“Some of my friends have tried to convince me not to risk my life, while others have been affected by my reports [and think that] I should not publish them. So some of my friends and relatives have cut their ties with me.”

Farida Nasiri, head of the women’s union of Ghor province, said, “It would take hours to list all Hakimi’s attributes and activities, but I can sum it up by saying that there may never be a more active and more resilient reporter in all Ghor, and even in all Afghanistan.”

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