

## **Lean Times for Afghan Journalism**

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Media sector sees job losses as donor funding shrinks.

Afghan journalists say cuts in international funding for the media are threatening one of the past decade's success stories as well as many of their jobs.

More than 50 television channels have emerged since the Taliban administration was ousted in late 2001, and Afghanistan also has more than 100 radio stations and some 700 newspapers and magazines.

However, journalists say international assistance to the media has been in decline since 2008, and jobs are now being axed in large numbers.

Some warn that if western donor support tails off, it will be replaced by covert funding from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan – with all the influence that will buy those countries.

Pajhwok Afghan News, which describes itself as Afghanistan's largest independent news agency and was established by IWPR, has laid off 70 of its 130 journalists because of financial difficulties, according to its director Danesh Karokhel.

Pajhwok is trying to cover the salaries of its remaining staff by charging for stories, but Karokhel says he is uncertain how long this can continue.

The same cuts are taking place elsewhere. In May alone, around 300 journalists working for free and unbiased media outlets across Afghanistan lost their jobs, according to information gathered by Pajhwok.

In the eastern province of Logar, journalist Maqsud Azizi has lost his job with Pajhwok and is concerned about his future.

Over the past decade, he has seen other colleagues reluctantly take jobs with partisan media outlets because they needed the money. Now, with a family to support, he says he may also have to take work from "anyone who pays me".

Nai, a non-government group that works to promote independent media and freedom of expression, believes that both are now at risk.

"Unbiased media are on the verge of collapse, and attention must be paid this," Nai's director Sediqullah Tauhidi said.

Tauhidi said the impressive achievements of Afghan journalism over the past decade could be undermined if western donors pulled out and backers from neighbouring states filled the space.

"Media outlets which have bowed to Iran and Pakistan may intensify their activities against western interests, as well as against freedom of speech and democracy in Afghanistan," he warned.

In Kabul, there is already talk of Pakistan and Iran recruiting Afghan journalists. In April, Lutfullah Mashal, a spokesman for the National Directorate of Security, NDS, the domestic intelligence agency, accused certain media outlets of working for Iran or Pakistan.

The NDS announced on May 6 that it had detained a reporter working for the Fars News Agency. He was accused of revealing confidential government documents to Tehran.

Abdul Satar Sadat, a political analyst and director of the Afghan Lawyers' Network, believes both countries have already got their own media outlets in Afghanistan.

Rahimullah Samandar, director of RFE/RL radio in Kabul, warned that if international aid decreases further after 2014, when NATO-led forces withdraw, neighbouring states will be well placed to increase their influence.

"Certain media outlets supported by neighbouring countries and by spiteful political parties working against Afghanistan's interests will be strengthened," he said. "There is a concern that these media outlets will be used as a tool against democracy."

Iranian diplomats declined to talk to IWPR about these claims of interference, while Ghulam Mohammad from the Pakistani embassy's press office said his country had neither established nor supported any media organisations in Afghanistan. He said the embassy's relationship with Afghan journalists was

confined to answering their questions.

Afghanistan's deputy information minister, Mobarez Rashedi, was optimistic that donor funding would hold up after 2014, and said his ministry was trying to "encourage new donors" while pressing for "greater transparency in their work"

Member of parliament Shinkai Karokhail says aid transparency has been a problem in the past, and alleges that large sums have gone to media outlets controlled by warlords and other powerful figures.

Nevertheless, she said, "Afghanistan's media are still young and need to become more professional, so it's essential for the international community to continue its support."

Journalist Rahim Malekzai believes many Afghan media outlets are already compromised, with many established by political parties or linked to particular factions, or else backed by Pakistan and Iran.

Without further support from international donors, he warns, the situation can only get worse.

"Unless the international community supports them, journalists who have so far maintained their impartiality to some extent will not be able to hold out against media outlets that are supported by neighbouring countries or by different factions and parties," he said.

The United States government has been a major funding source for media development since 2001. Its Kabul embassy sent IWPR a statement saying that at the international conference on future support for Afghanistan held in Germany in December 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted that donor countries faced fiscal constraints themselves.

"But what everyone in Bonn agreed to was that there would be no precipitous cut-off of assistance," the statement said.

The statement said the US Agency for International Developments had spent over 56 million US dollars on media development in Afghanistan since 2002. In the fiscal year 2010-11, the embassy's Public Affairs Section spent about 27 million dollars to support programming and operations at Afghan media outlets and to provide training and capacity building; and another 17.5 million dollars to support university journalism departments.

Not all media outlets depend on donor support, and some have developed successful business models by selling airtime for commercials.

Mujahid Kakar is head of news and political programming at the Tolo TV, Tolo News and Lemar stations, and insists the three channels will be immune to cuts in foreign aid cuts as they make their money advertising. The Arman FM and Arakozia FM radio stations, which are part of the same Moby Group, will also be unaffected, he said.

At the same time, Kakar acknowledged that some staff employed by the media group had been laid off as declining private investment led to falling advertising revenues.

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