

State Accused of Censorship

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Prominent editor claims closure of his government-controlled paper is a blow for media freedom.

The Afghan ministry of information has been hit by accusations of censorship after the first casualty of its move to prune state-owned media was a newspaper that had published a number of articles critical of the authorities.

Arman-e Milli, National Desire, was set up by minister of information and culture Sayed Makhdoom Rahin to fill the information vacuum that followed the collapse of the Taleban - a time when existing government papers were still in disarray.

Rahin told IWPR that with the media now functioning again, the title had served its purpose and was no longer needed to sustain a democratic press.

Kabul has a total of five state-run papers, which, Rahin said, resulted in duplication, "A lot of the stories were repeated with the same photos from the same agency, the same news and even the same words, so we are going to try and limit that."

Under new proposals, only Anis, the longest-standing state-run publication, will remain in government hands.

In an interview with IWPR, former editor-in-chief of Arman-e Milli, Mir Haider Mutahar, challenged Rahin's claim, arguing that the sudden decision to close the paper in October followed pressure to publish the views of the ministry.

"Our editorial board decided to stop publishing this 'news' and we didn't publish 'news' relating to the minister himself. This is one of the reasons [for the ban]," he said.

He added that the paper had recently published an interview with a critic of Kabul City Council, which Rahin helped to establish.

The latter, however, insists that the closure was part of a wider programme to reduce government involvement in the media, "We don't need a source for preaching as we had before...to make democracy a reality the best way is that the government should not have this many publications."

He added that both Bakhter, the national news agency, and Radio and Television Afghanistan, RTA, may also be privatised, in a process which will place ethical standards and proven commitment to the national interest above the sums of money offered.

Money saved on subsidising the media in Kabul will be earmarked to help strength media in the provinces, where the only voice to be heard is often that of the local governor.

However, some observers worry that Kabul is not yet ready to sustain a truly independent press with

neither a big enough readership, nor enough advertising dollars. The fear is that if the government withdraws from the media, it will be concentrated in the hands of those with the most money.

Currently, most privately-owned papers belong to political parties, or in a few cases, wealthy businessmen.

Media development NGO Internews recently estimated that the government spends 69,000 US dollars per month to subsidise just three papers: Anis, Arman-e Milli and Hewad. Few Afghans have those kinds of funds.

Afghan editors have mixed views about the privatisation.

Siamak Heravi, editor-in-chief of Anis, noted that without any subsidy, the cost of many papers would rise. In principle, however, he thought that privatisation could be a progressive move, so long as potential investors were strictly vetted, "Their information should be accurate. They should respect the national spirit and not hold allegiances to any particular party or group."

Fazal Rahman Orya, editor-in-chief of Mashal-e Democracy, an organ of a group of small new democratic parties, sees a continuing role for the state media at this stage of Afghanistan's development, " Who will reflect the government's orders, decrees and objectives?"

Habibullah Rafi, editor of the country's highest circulation publication, Kilid Weekly, produced by the Afghan NGO Development and Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan, argues that privatisation cannot be justified unless there is a tax system in place so that profits individuals make from former state assets can be channelled back into the economy.

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