
Afghan media freedoms under siege

Contributed by Times Staff

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN — Once hailed as a sign that this war-torn country was coming back to life, Afghanistan's burgeoning media have fallen on troubled times.

Reports of official intimidation and harassment of reporters have risen over the last year. Journalists say that local authorities and political bosses, unaccustomed to public scrutiny and criticism, are lashing out and even resorting to thuggery to protest or prevent unflattering coverage. In mid-April, authorities raided the nation's most successful private TV station.

Tragedy has struck as well, with the brutal killing last month of a young interpreter-cum-journalist by Taliban insurgents.

On top of these concerns comes legislation that critics say threatens to roll back many of the gains in establishing a more open society where repression once reigned.

The measure, now pending before parliament, would give officials the right to crack down on anything deemed harmful to the national interest, the primacy of Islam or the "physical, spiritual and moral well-being" of the Afghan people.

Chilling effect feared

Few predict that such guidelines would usher in a return to the suffocating days of the Taliban era, a dark age for the media when television was banned, newspapers were essentially religious tracts and radio stations were forbidden to play music.

But analysts fear a chilling effect — a new, uncertain environment in which journalists constantly look over their shoulders and perhaps refrain from airing criticism of the government or pursuing investigations of corruption, police abuse and other official misdeeds.

Democracy has struggled to take root in Afghanistan since the Taliban's overthrow by a U.S.-led military coalition at the end of 2001. The country has held elections, and lawmakers joust verbally where once they tried to obliterate one another as rival warlords on the battlefield. Yet other pillars of liberal democracy are on much shakier ground.

Afghans point with pride to the seven private television channels, the 60 FM radio stations and the hundreds of magazines and newspapers now dotting the media landscape.

However, in January, police detained a reporter for the private Tolo TV network, demanding to know why he had had telephone contact with a spokesman for the Taliban. The reporter explained that it was part of his job to produce balanced stories, but he was held by police for 30 hours.

That month, Najib Roshan, the head of Afghanistan's state-run radio and television network, resigned in protest after the country's information minister sent armed agents to the network's offices to sack journalists the minister wanted removed.

And last month, Tolo TV's offices were raided by police on orders from Afghanistan's attorney general, who was displeased with how his comments were portrayed in a news broadcast. Footage from the office's security cameras showed police roughing up staff members.

Harassment under color of authority has become commonplace throughout the country, said Rahimullah Samander, president of the Afghan Independent Journalists Assn.

"We have a lot of examples of local officials … interfering with the media," he said. "They are changing story ideas on journalists. They are even putting pressure to change the story structure and quotations."

Official denies censorship

Information Minister Abdul Karim Khuram denies that the government has any plans to gag the media.

"I and the government are against political censorship. The government welcomes criticism," Khuram said through an aide. "I personally welcome criticism."

Others are not so sure, questioning Khuram's understanding of a free press.

"In this country there's been a climate of control of media, because the media have been government-owned. So the government has an expectation that the media will do what they tell them to," said Saad Mohseni, who founded Tolo TV with his siblings. "The minister himself sees the ministry as a personal fiefdom…. The day-to-day obstacles that are being created to [limit] the operations of free media are coming almost purely from the minister and his cronies."

Mohseni's network has been a major target of complaints and attacks from officials because of its popularity and its reputation as a scrappy, politically independent news outlet. Criticism of the government, including Tolo's willingness to show lawmakers napping in parliament, is as much the network's daily bread as the music videos and movies that scandalize more conservative Afghans.

"Today Afghanistan's media have wonderful power. They are trying to engage people with new things, give them the power to say what they want," said Shukria Barakzai, a member of parliament and former journalist.

The Afghan parliament may vote on the media bill this week.

Journalists, rights groups and international observers such as the United Nations hope that the government will not deal

a blow to the newly free press.

"We have tried very hard to educate the parliamentarians," Mohseni said. "There is a very close tie-in between democracy and free media. You can't really have one without the other. If we've committed ourselves to democracy, then we also have to commit ourselves to freedom of the press."