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AFGHANISTAN'S MEDIA DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES IN THE PAST TWO DECADES: A SHORT GLANCE AT MEDIA FREEDOM

Keywords: Media, democracy, Afghanistan, propaganda.

ABSTRACT: Media, during Taliban five years period from 1996–2001, had been totally suffocated. Only limited number of print media would publish to spread the propaganda of Taliban Emirate under Sharia Law. Post-Taliban era, media landscape obtained new image with the establishment of democratic government. Independent media were allowed to operate in accordance with the formation of new constitution of 2004.

Since the two decades of war after 9/11, media have still been maintaining its responsibility in Afghanistan to rise and promote the voice of right, equality and justice, defend human rights and spread public awareness in order to serve for social responsibilities. Despite continued challenges media outlets and journalists have made tremendous progress which it has resulted in harm of their personal life from time to time due to threats of insecurity, war, warlords, strongmen, corrupted actors in government as well as in attacks of Taliban and ISIS insurgents. Hence, media outlets and journalists have been carrying on their responsibilities despite of availed risks to them and their families.

In this paper, it has been viewed the status of media freedom, process of development and continued challenges to media freedom and journalists.

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INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has almost one and a half century history of press and media. With the first lithography printing machine and with the first issue of *Sham-su-Nahar* printed in 1973 during the reign of king Amir Shir Ali Khan by the efforts of Afghan scholar Said Jamaludin Afghan, born the idea of press in Afghanistan. Since then, the press has been able to make its way up with stringent hardships. The founders of press has undergone hardest days in the history of press and media of Afghanistan. *Anis* magazine known as *Anis Jaridah* was utmost the first non-governmental paper publishing during king Amanullah Khan reign in 1920s under the Chief-in-editor Mahiddin Anis who was the founder himself (Raiszada, 2019). Thereby, the independent media basically appeared in 1940s through passing a press law during the premiership of Shah Mahmud. Later, in 1953, the independent press came to be closed while Mohammad Daud became the prime minister. The post-1964 known as “Decade of Democracy” with the promulgating of new constitution by king Mohammad Zahir Sha in which independent media was thoroughly allowed to operate, according to law that “every Afghan has the right to express his thoughts in speech, in writing, in pictures, and by other means, in accordance with the provisions of the law” (Tarzi, 2006). So, the 2004 new constitution in fact is the duplication of 1964 constitution of which media were enjoyed independence after the Bonn Agreement. Today’s media freedom and the freedom of expression is the outcome of modern century demands and needs. And, the whole credit is referred to the twentieth century press fighters whose efforts are appreciated in this regard.

MEDIA FREEDOM AND DEVELOPMENT

The press history of Afghanistan dates back to the last decades of nineteenth century of king Amir Shir Ali Khan reign of 1960s-1970s. Since then, there have been numerous challenges to the press and media in various regimes those are documented in the modern history of Afghanistan wherein press and media have undergone ups and downs along with

political changes. More importantly, media once took new breath of freedom after the fall of Taliban regime toppled by US in October 2001 following 9/11 attacks carried out on the trade centres of United States and claimed by Al-Qaida, a world terrorist network (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Subsequently, the Bonn agreement in December 2001 attended by Afghan political groups and international community actors paved the way to establishing a democratic government in Afghanistan. Later adopting of the Afghanistan new constitution in January 2004 from Loya Jirga (grand council) was a milestone achievement for the people of Afghanistan (BBC, 2019). The newly adopted constitution became more productive in line of freedom of speech and media freedom along with other human rights. The constitution endorsed United Nations charter and different conventions and utmost particularly human rights in the article seven that “state shall observe the United Nations Charter, inter-state agreements, as well as international treaties to which Afghanistan has joined, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...” (Afghanistan Const. art. VII, § 1). As the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (UN General Assembly art. 19). The Afghanistan constitution has given this right to the people of Afghanistan in order to express their opinions and ideas through different channels of communications as well as to seek and receive information through any media. For example, the article thirty four of the constitution defines the right of freedom of speech and freedom of media, further that “freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution. Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities. Directives to the press, radio and television as well as publications and other mass media shall be regulated by law” (Afghanistan Const. art. XXXIV, § 2). The mass media law of Afghanistan was enacted in 2006. It has arranged in accordance with the article 34 of constitution of Afghanistan and the article 19

of United Nations Declaration of Human Rights so as to guarantee the right of freedom of speech and ensure the right of freedom of media in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the access to information law constituted in line of with the article 50 of third paragraph of Afghanistan constitution states, that “the citizens of Afghanistan shall have the right access to information from state departments in accordance with the provisions of the law. This right shall have no limit except when harming rights of others as well as public security..” (Afghanistan Const. art. L, § 2). This is called a brilliant achievement to the media house and the Afghan citizens which it was approved by Afghan president Mohammad Ashraf Ghani in 2014 and it was endorsed by the president Ghani after the amendments in 2018 (Access to Information Commission, 2019). The law aims at protecting the right of citizens to have access to information of institutions, ensure transparency and make the institutions staffs accountable to share information with media and people on time, and help to regulate the process of requesting and providing information to media and citizens which it is facilitating to open governance (Access to Information Commission, 2019). From one hand, it is a progressive function, but on the other hand, the process of implementation of access to information law is remained tardy, and there is no stronger intention from the state and non-state authorities and authorized officials to accelerate the process of implementation of the law through a viable contribution.

Though, following the Taliban regime, the new constituted democratic republic system in Afghanistan which it has fully support of international community helped media to have freedom based on national interests and sacred religious values. Within the past twenty years, nearly 80 TV networks, 150 radio stations and hundreds of print media; News, papers, magazines, weekly, biweekly publications and online news agencies and websites have been established throughout the country (Qazi, 2018).

With ups and downs, the Afghan media flourished public awareness in the society, strengthened democracy, supported good governance, disclosed numerous corruption cases, criticized over corrupt politics, identified despotic circles and dual actions of authorities, and reported events corresponded with human rights from every walks of life and even the reconstruction of the country. Now the majority of the population can

have access to read, listen and watch the media contents, stories and programs. It has brought out a significant change in Afghan society. The media industry has improved and developed efficiently and need to do more effective. International donors paid peculiar attention to state-run media and private independent media sector to enhance media capacities. As such, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) made assistance to media improvement under the Afghanistan Media Development and Empowerment Project (AMDEP) program to fill the needed gaps of media felt in media sector. For instance, USAID has fulfilled its services to support Radio and Television Stations (RTS) technically, provided opportunities for young journalists and professionals to foster their practical fields of work, helped civil society including women to have a broad access to media, engaged with Afghan government, media and civil society to facilitate for dialogue on media and to develop new policies for media law regulatory strategies (USAID, 2019).

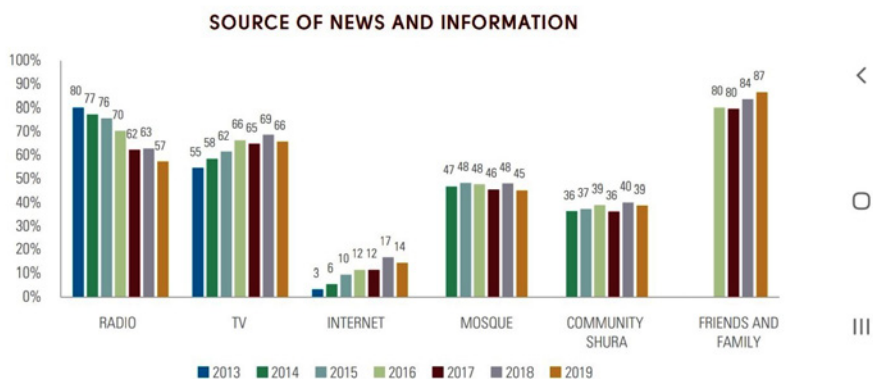
Despite of the chronic decades of clashes in Afghanistan, Media and press professionals have been making tireless attempts to continue their working in media field. At least 1000 media outlets are operating in the country while it is compared only with 15 in 2000 (Khalwatgar, 2014). The majority comes from private media stations including radio and television channels, newspapers, magazines and online news webpages in which almost 12,000 people have been facilitated the opportunities utmost in private media sector (Khalwatgar, 2014).

The media development in Afghanistan is deemed to be a wonderful success to maintain the flow of information and keep the audiences informed. However, people are mostly optimistic to have access media channels broadly throughout the country in order to listen, read and watch while it is unlike and different based on the media functions. For example, when it comes to Radio stations and TVs channels. There has been ruling by TV channels in urban areas covering 40 percent of the population while Radio has been continuing to have domination over rural areas making 73 percent audiences of the population. Besides Print media (Newspaper, magazine, or quarterly) are not accessible outside of cities and makes only one percent audiences of the whole population (Khalwatgar, n.d.). The sole reason is estimated of no culture of reading on account

of four decades of wars in Afghanistan. In the domain of internet, people are finding access to internet to nurture their appetite. According to the ministry of communication and technology, almost 28 percent of the population (more than nine million people) has access to internet even in urban and rural areas in the country (Khalwatgar, n.d.).

The Asia Foundation survey from 2004 to 2019 shows remarkable ups and downs among radio, television and internet as a source of news and information. Since 2013 to 2019, in the chart below, there is seen a gradual decrease from 80 percent to 57 percent in radio listenership (Akseer et al., 2019). Unlike, within the same period, in the chart below, the percentage of Television viewership has increased from 55 percent to 66 percent as a source of news and information. As per the chart below from 2013 to 2019, using internet is being increased in Afghanistan. The survey describes that the percentage of using internet has reached from 3 to 14 percent. Approximately 17.6% Afghans have access to internet using, a tremendous increase over the 1.1% those who were the internet users in 2006 (Akseer et al., 2019).

In comparison to each other, radio has been making to continue to its domination in rural areas and it will absolutely keep its value amongst old aged as a news source. The young generation has increasingly been



Source: https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAzZL-BRDnARIsAPCJs70DfsV2tYKqJzJI24hUMgGicGsJViCuVpRPFvmzSAETUpz2ewzcgZoaAlHxEALw_wcB.

exposed to media as a source of entertainment and social responsibilities. In addition, television finds the route to the rural areas in case of facilities. For example, people from rural areas provides electricity themselves through arranging solar system, setting inexpensive dish TVs sets at their respective homes could be operative through solar power. Furthermore, internet is not as active connection in rural areas as it has been in urban areas. Although internet users are growing in rural areas who are commonly subjected users of social media in particular Facebook and Twitter as a source of news and information. Despite of difficulties media outlets including state-run media and independent media as well as local and international media have attempted to provide news and information to their audiences actively in 24 hours. Overall, media financial problems, weak connection facilities and poverty are the main reasons that inter-linked to each other.

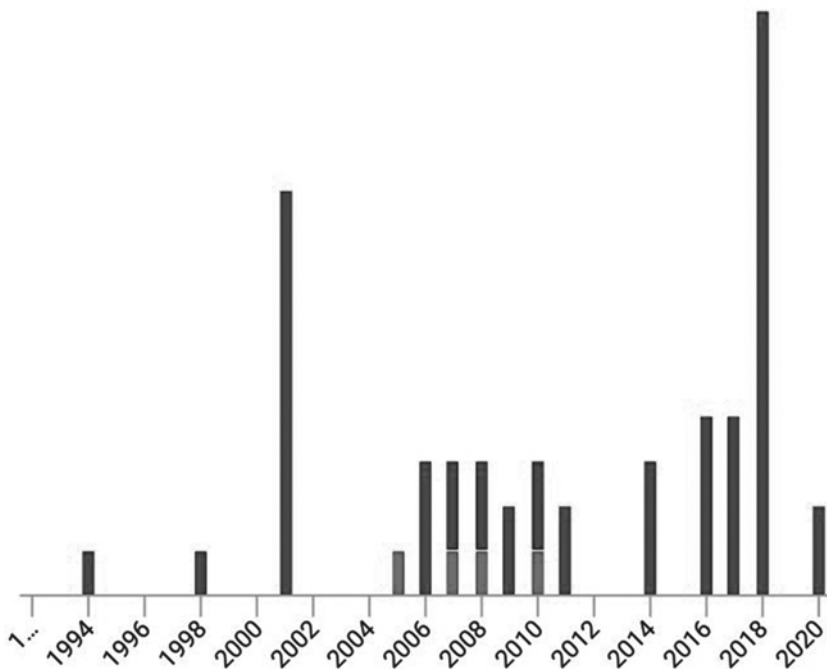
MEDIA FREEDOM AND CHALLENGES

Media and journalists are often ran into difficulties not only in war-torn Afghanistan but throughout the world who report from troubled zones or make critics over political figures those who are in power. According to a study UK-based charity article 19, freedom of expression has come down low globally in the past decade in more than sixty five countries. The decline in freedom of expression as a major factor is the rise of strong-man politics in a number of countries (Ingram, 2019). Though Afghanistan could be called one of dangerous places for media outlets and journalists because of the longest four decades clashes and wars exist in the country. Media and journalists have, from time to time, been targeted by different individuals, groups and unknown armed insurgents although the freedom of media is secured legally. Violence against media sector has been higher in recent years which is a concerned issue for the media family and civil societies in Afghanistan, and further to international human rights defenders. Continued challenges to freedom of speech and media undermine the role of democracy and the process of transparency and accountability between elected government and citizens. Moreover, it also impacts

on the open governance in case of the flow of information is interrupted or it is caused of restrictions.

As a result, accountable persons in power will come forward for taking bribes and corruptions leading to no fundamental reforms and development. So, some leading challenges to freedom of speech and most particularly to media and journalists exist in common. As Afghanistan is not wholly enjoyed of the freedom of expression, and it has steadily been suffering from uninterrupted challenges. Though the core challenges to media outlets and journalists in Afghanistan could be first started from insecurity issues as follows:

Afghanistan has still been at a horrific war. The insecurity is the biggest issue to media and journalists. Since the fall of Taliban in 2001, media outlets and journalists have not been feeling safe. They have often been under attacks from involved political factions, armed groups, and strong richest persons and so on. The Committee to Protect Journalists of almost



Source: <https://cpj.org/blog/asia/afghanistan/>.

three decades chart shows the growing violence against media and journalists since 2001 to 2020, who have been killed during news coverage in the field, targeted by unknown armed men frequently (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.).

According to Khalwatgar a media activist in Afghanistan says, “Since 2001, almost 120 journalists and media workers have been killed; more than 1550 violence cases against media have been registered and, except for a few of them, no prosecution processes have been launched for the cases” (Khalwatgar, n.d. para. 1). The rate of violence towards journalists has still been a usual recourse in the country where journalists have been persecuting from political figures, military individuals, powerful actors, warlords, unknown faces even from Taliban and other insurgents when they are at office, home, government conferences or report from the site of incident to their respective media. They are received warnings from various addresses to intimidate them on detention, torture, beat and even by death. Attacks on media offices and journalists have tremendously been augmented throughout the country in particular from Taliban, ISIS and unknown individuals, and some of them may links to intelligence. The government has done nothing in this regard to protect journalists’ lives and pay a special attention to their career.

The ever deadliest year according to Reporters without Borders (RWB) (n.d.) was the 2018 for Afghan journalists since the fall of Taliban regime in 2001, took over 15 journalists and media workers lives in a series of bombings, nine of only in a single day. The causes of casualties and misbehaviours with journalists and the threats to media and press freedom in Afghanistan has been specified by Reporters Without Borders that are called to be the ongoing war of Taliban and Islamic state of Khurasan (IS-K), and the warlords including corrupt political officials who usually threatens the flow of information and the journalists (Reporters without Borders, n.d.).

In addition, Afghanistan has taken the place of sixth in global impunity index as successive in 2018 (Witchel, n.d.) and 2019 years on account of unsolved cases of journalists’ murders. (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019). In 2020, Afghanistan has ranked fifth of the list, a worst record of prosecution of journalists murders (Beiser, 2020). It is called the worst

spots of records for the persecuting the murders of journalists and the suspected ones go free. Based on the global impunity index, since 2008 to 2020, Afghanistan has remained in top ten. If the insecurity and the violence continue the same way the country will be keeping its spot on the top of the list of global impunity index.

Politics has also deepest roots to influence media leads to harming press freedom at some extent. Political parties and figures often make attempts to manipulate private media and benefit from for personal purposes at national level. On the other hand, high and low level officials in the government frequently don't maintain their contribution to provide timely information for media. Often journalists face harassment as verbal or physically and they receive misbehave actions from government staff when they are asked for information. This is to be called the troubled issue against access to information law. Countless cases of violence; beatings, warnings and intimidations have been recorded by the media-based organizations carried out against journalists. Furthermore, the Afghan peace process has been in progress for which the media outlets and journalists are worried to the freedom of expression, a key achievement of two decades has to be protected along with other achievements. The reason that Taliban has still been continuing to threaten media and journalists (Khalwatgar, 2014).

Besides media needs to make financial incomes from legal sources and increase revenues for the media survival. In Afghanistan, a number of major media have the ownership of political parties, warlords and businessmen to influence on public opinion for their political purposes and introduce their picture of politics and activities more positive to the public. Many small including local media established by the professionals and civil society activists are being countered financial challenges. First, dozens of media were funded by international donors since the demise of Taliban regime. Whenever the US-led forces under the NATO mission withdrew from Afghanistan in 2014. Media involved in financial problems, because media would be receiving regular economic support from international donors. Second, Afghanistan doesn't have a contesting market of products to find way to media advertisements. Industrial sector and investment can't be counted on to be actively functional as higher as it is

compared to neighbouring countries and beyond. So due to the weak market of the country has thrown impacts on media survival. The commercial advertisements can't meet media financial needs, and some media are active with very low revenues. Most of local media has already reduced their staff after the withdrawal of International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) under the mission of NATO. As per the Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan report, over 75 media entities have closed their offices because of economic problems in Afghanistan where media has faced budget shortages. Based on the report government doesn't support media which government is obliged to support the media according Mass Media Law defined (NAI, n.d.).

According khalwatgar, "Financial challenges caused almost 240 media outlets to stop their activities in the country since 2014. Tens of radio stations and almost 6 TV stations are among the media outlets that have stopped their activities mainly because of financial problems" (Khalwatgar, A.M. n.d. para. 2).

For media, financial challenges are somewhat to be paid heavily attention. Otherwise there would be gradual decline in media industry. Other challenges to media freedom is the weak professionalism in particular those who are interested to emerge as journalists without to be professional or at least have read about journalism. There are examples of uneducated of journalism working in media committed of mistakes while provide reports or share information with related media station which may hurt press freedom. This challenge was mostly felt before when media came into existence in initial times. No capabilities were usually taken into account by the media owners in the process of recruitment.

CONCLUSION

Eventually media in democratic governments play remarkable role to hold a democratic authority accountable and make the officials to share information timely with media for the public. Free media observes government functions regularly and discloses corruption, evil actions of administration and criticizes over political figures as well as state authorities. Afghan

media has enjoyed fully of freedom based on the constitution and mass media law to disseminate information in the view of national interests. The continued challenges against media and journalists created a decline to press freedom and to the media family. A proved rationale behind of challenges is the relevant issues of two decades armed conflict, constant corruption in government, despotic behaviours from political individuals and warlords towards journalists, and not implementation of the laws and constitution that have caused to the violence towards media and journalists. It has undermined the freedom of speech and paved the way to self-censorship in Afghanistan. On the other hand, government has not remained committed to constitution, mass media law, access to information law implementation and to the freedom of speech, and to the freedom of media as it is expected. The threats to journalists are being grown because there has not been seriously intention by the Afghan government to support media in any situation and promote the independence of media as much as it is required. Although state authorities and political parties and influential individuals are making continuous attempts to increase their influence on private media sector which is totally press laws. And it may hurt the freedom of media and pave the way to censor facts and harm the flow of information.

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