



INTERNEWS



Journalism Freedom Report v.4

Media Watch

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Pressure on independent as well as state-controlled media in Afghanistan has been increasing in recent months with frequent statements from different groups criticizing so-called ‘un-Islamic’ content, especially on TV channels. In the absence of specified guidelines on what is Islamic, various interest groups choose their own interpretation, urging repeatedly for a crackdown on specific media organizations.

Minister for Information and Culture, Sayed Makhdom Raheen, told *Media Watch* that he was facing a lot of pressure from different directions including from extremists who were going to mosques and berating him (Raheen) for not taking action against the visual media.

An indication of the pressure on independent media was evident this week when the national Ulema Council (council of religious scholars), headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Fazl Hadi Shinwari, issued a statement which inter alia criticized all TV channels telecasting in Afghanistan, especially singling out Afghanistan’s own independent channels for censure.

Earlier in the month Raheen himself issued a statement calling on TV channels to observe the principles of Islam in their program content.

Independent TV channels Tolo TV and Afghan TV have protested, asserting that their programs are well within the parameters of Islam as well as the culture and traditions of Afghanistan. Earlier, independent TV channel Tolo TV also questioned the mandate of the commission which has been set up to monitor electronic media. The commission had criticized a music program on Tolo and demanded the removal of one of the anchors.

This newsletter also documents instances of intimidation of community radio stations in northern Afghanistan from Uzbek strongman Abdul Rasheed Dostum’s political wing, the Junbish-e Milli. Though the incidents are not recent, the continuing pattern of

intimidation following every repeat broadcast of a particular program mentioning Dostum makes it important.

This newsletter also takes note of a meeting of journalists of Balkh province, also in northern Afghanistan, who expressed their concerns about censorship. While no specific recent incidents of censorship were made public at this meeting, it was important in that it registered the common perception of a large number of local journalists. Earlier interactions of *Media Watch* with journalists in the province have shown that journalists are unwilling to go public with specific details of intimidation for fear of further retaliation.

The last instance does not fall into the pattern of censorship or intimidation being recorded by this newsletter but nonetheless is an important indicator of the state of Afghan media practitioners who continue to battle allegiances of many traditional media outlets to political factions. In Herat recently, political rivalries spilled out onto the media platform, an indicator of the continuing difficulties of establishing independent media in the country.

1. Pressure from Ulema Council:

The national Ulema Council, headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Fazl Hadi Shinwari, issued a statement on March 13, one article of which criticized all TV channels telecasting in Afghanistan. The statement was issued after a council meeting reserved its most strident criticism for independent Afghan TV channels.

According to independent Afghan news agency Pajhwok, the Ulema Council asked the government to stop “immoral and un-Islamic” telecasts and called for a ban on music programs with dances, which, they said, was against the Sharia, or Islamic law.

Maulavi Qiam-ud-Din Kashaf, secretary of the council, was quoted by the news agency as saying, "We've decided this in accordance with the Constitution and also called for a ban on telecasts which have dances as this is absolutely contrary to the Sharia." Kashaf told the agency the Ulema had taken a stand and it was up to the government now whether to implement their request or not. When Pajhwok asked the Presidential press office in Kabul about the mullah's statement, it refused to comment.

The council, in its statement, also said: “It has been seen that all TV channels being telecast in the country, particularly Tolo and Afghan TV, broadcast music, naked dances and foreign films contrary to Islamic and national values.”

2. Tolo TV comment:

The commission set up to initially to review the ban on cable TV networks is steadily increasing the scope of its function, scrutinizing individual programs for content.

However, the very legality of the commission and its mandate has been challenged by an independent TV channel, Tolo TV.

After being summoned to the commission on February 16, independent TV channel Tolo TV made a written protest. In its statement, Tolo claims it had been summoned to appear before the commission on that date. Though the commission comprises of five members, only two were present at the meeting: former presidential spokesman, Hamed Elmi, and the head of Afghan films, Engineer Latif. Also present was a non-member.

According to Tolo, all three criticized the independent station's broadcasts, especially the Hop program, a music program, saying the language used on the channel was not appropriate as it was 'street talk'. They also questioned the presence of one of the main anchors of the program and said that he should be taken off the program. According to Tolo they also made disparaging remarks about some of the journalists employed by the TV channel, saying they were not respectable members of society since they had ignored the culture of the people. The three, including the two commission members, threatened that they would ask the Supreme Court to impose a ban on the channel if such programs continued.

In its statement, Tolo said it was operating within the legal framework in accordance with the Constitution and the media law and observing all social, moral and traditional values. The TV channel has challenged the legality of the commission's mandate, asking under which article of the Constitution and the media law it has been formed.

Asked about the incident, Minister for Information and Culture Sayed Makhdoom Raheen claims he was perturbed about the incident when he heard about it from Tolo and spoke to commission member Hamed Elmi about it. According to Raheen, Elmi's explanation was that the commission was having an informal 'chat' with the station. It had not put anything in writing and had only expressed an opinion the way anyone watching TV programs might do.

The commission's explanation is baffling. A formal body appointed by the President to review and assess TV programs with the mandate to ban any unsuitable programming can hardly take the position that its opinions, however expressed, constitute an informal chat. Any meeting of the commission summoning any media organization constitutes a formal process and cannot be disregarded by the organization. Nor can a media organization summoned and dressed down before the commission ignore these opinions expressed by the commission. It further begs the question as to why the commission, if it had no specific issue with the TV program it was criticizing, misused its authority for an 'informal chat'.

3. Raheen Statement:

Information and Culture Minister Sayed Makhdom Raheen says he is a man in a difficult position. He told *Media Watch* that he is under considerable pressure from different

interests, including extremists critical of the liberal programming being currently shown on TV. Raheen said he has been advising TV channels not to put him in a difficult position where it becomes impossible for him to defend them as he supports the work of independent TV stations.

The pressures on Raheen apparently led him to issue a suo moto statement on content in the audio-visual media last week. The Minister said, "All visual media are requested to pay attention to the values of Islam and take into account the traditions of the people. Raheen said to a Bakhtar news agency correspondent: "We are a nation with deep historical and cultural roots and foreign influence should not meddle with this. New generations should be brought up on solid Islamic and national culture.

He emphasized that visual media have a special responsibility in shaping future generations and that visual media should "carry out this task keeping in mind the fact that these generations have passed their childhood in war and disturbances."

The statement reflects a trend that is a departure from earlier statements and assertions in support of free and independent media.

(The Minister's office was unable to provide a copy of the statement but referred Internews to RTA. An RTA official read out this statement which was then translated by *Media Watch*.)

4. Satirical program on community radio stations:

Satire and humor is not something that all of Afghanistan's leaders appreciate. A program called *Huma-i-Saadat* was supplemented with a satirical article from the *Zanbil-i-Gham* magazine. Produced by *Salaam Watandar*, the independent broadcaster that provides live and recorded programming to community radio stations, the program got two of these radio stations into trouble.

During the elections, *Zanbil-i Gham* was producing a series of candidate profiles, mainly focusing on the social and political life of candidates but also including a satirical piece interspersed with jokes and humor. The program was broadcast every night during the election campaign.

The night on which a summary of all the satires were aired, Radio Takharistan in Takhar Province received a call from members of youth wing of the Junbish-e Milli party. The members called the radio station criticizing the program. The reason: the Junbish leader, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, was one of the 18 presidential candidates profiled in the satirical program.

Dostum, a former commander in the Northern provinces has subsequently been appointed as Chief of Staff to President Karzai.

The Junbish members claimed that “people” had wanted to destroy the radio station and that they had had to prevent them. “This should not happen again” they said referring to the satirical program that had just been broadcast.

After receiving the phone call the radio station got in touch with the Managing Editor of *Salaam Watandar*, Mirwais Social. Social wasted no time in acting on the complaint. He called up the youth union office which had threatened Radio Takhar and asked what the problem was. Social said that since it was *Salaam Watandar* which had prepared the program, the union should have complained to *Salaam Watandar* rather than the radio station. He asked the youth union leader to call back the radio station and tell them that their call was a mistake. Soon after, the radio station received a call and an apology. In this case, standing firm helped strengthen the radio station because of prompt backing from Kabul.

However, that was not the end of the problems concerning this particular program. The piece profiling the politicians was well-received and there were many calls for a repeat broadcast. Unaware of the problems in another province, another community radio station in the North broadcast this program several months later.

After the broadcast, 20 or 25 members of Junbish Youth “came into the radio station compound and wanted to destroy the antennae and the radio station” according to a journalist working at the station. They objected to the satire on Dostum and left only after the radio station called in the police for protection. The Information and Culture officer of the township also came to the radio station and escorted one of the journalists to the office of the Governor to speak about the incident.

Though the incident seems to have ended there, according to a journalist of the radio station, “the station feels there are limits to what can be broadcast regarding Dostum because the reaction is so volatile.”

5. Balkh Meeting:

A number of journalists in Mazar-e Sharif met in the office of the Mazar branch of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission early in February to discuss the issue of freedom of expression. The journalists expressed their frustration that journalists in the area still continue to face censorship and intimidation. Though individual journalists were not willing to go on record about the threats they receive when contacted by Internews, several of them spoke of a general atmosphere of intimidation, forcing them to exercise self-censorship. The government of Balkh Province subsequently issued a statement rejecting the remarks of the journalists, terming it untrue. The statement said the Balkh government once again voices support for the Human Rights Declaration and democracy and it expects all media to be more responsible and clear. The Balkh government, it said, was practicing democracy and freedom of expression for the press.

6. Herat:

Despite the increasing professionalism of the Afghan media, media organizations with linkages and loyalties to political factions continue to exist. In Herat, a political rivalry recently spilled into the print media. Factions loyal to current Governor Mohammed Khairkhwa and former Governor Ismael Khan crossed swords charging each other with maladministration. A newspaper loyal to Ismael Khan carried an article on the charges against the current governor, Khairkhwa, charges the Governor responded to in a public meeting. The newspaper later claimed that the provincial government had prevented publication of the article which finally had to be published from Kabul.

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