



INTERNEWS



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Journalism Freedom Report v.5 Media Watch

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Increasingly strident calls for a clampdown on behavior and practices that are being described as either “un-Islamic”, “against Afghanistan’s culture and traditions” or simply “immoral”, are providing increasing space for a renewed attack on independent media. This month saw the tussle between hardliners and audio-visual media intensifying with the Ulema Council reiterating its earlier call for a crackdown on independent audio-visual media on the grounds that it was un-Islamic.

Anonymous threats to media on grounds of ‘immoral programming’ were in evidence as well with a radio station being castigated for its musical programs. Interestingly, this radio station had also recently aired an expose on land grabbing activities in the area, leading journalists to believe that the charge of ‘immoral’ programming was merely providing a handy stick to those unable to counter the investigative reports.

Without any specific criticism or charge, media organizations are left shadow boxing with specters. Though no ‘action’ such as closure, has been taken against any media organization on grounds/accusations of un-Islamic content, the constant barrage of criticism leaves the independent media using its energies, resources as well as limited leverage to counter the charges rather than concentrate on producing more content. “We have not changed our stand but the pressure we face has made us modify our content from time to time,” a manager in a media organization said.

The technical requirements of electronic media are another reason forcing organizations to tread warily. Media organizations are well aware that while standing on their right to editorial freedom they can be denied requisite facilities and permissions on technical or bureaucratic grounds, especially since the practice often seems to be to ban first and ask later.

Even before the role and powers of the media monitoring commission set up to look at the content of the audio visual media could be clarified, the government set up yet another commission to monitor radio and television broadcasting.

Even political patronage appears to be insufficient protection at times for an increasingly critical media as AINA TV found when one of its reporters was beaten up recently despite the TV channel’s proximity to Northern warlord Abdul Rasheed Dostum.

In another development, the Taliban re-launched its Radio Sharia from a mobile radio station near Kandahar. The Taliban had banned independent media and all electronic media during their regime, broadcasting only on their own radio station Radio Sharia

Nascent efforts to redraft the media law began in late April, apparently initiated by the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Finally, some opportunities as well presented themselves for the local media. The International Federation of Journalists announced this year that its annual prize would be open to only South Asian journalists, giving regional journalists a greater chance.

1. Kabul: Ulema Council Criticizes Media:

In an apparent bid to maintain consistent pressure on independent Afghan TV channels, the Ulema Council which is headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Fazl Hadi Shinwari issued another statement on the un-Islamic content of the channels asking the government to take action. Following a meeting of the council (April 21 to 27), which was largely focused on discussing the code of conduct for women, the secretary and acting head of the Council, Moulvi Qiam ud din Kashaf said the President's office has also ordered the Minister of Information and Culture to control the content of TV programs. The Council had passed a resolution on the subject of un-Islamic content in media last month as well.

When contacted, the President's office however denied that President Hamid Karzai had spoken to the MoIC in this regard or issued any such instructions. A spokesman said that the President was in favor of independent media and freedom of media. The only consideration was that the content on TV should not be against the Islamic culture. The President's office was at pains to emphasize that no action was being taken against any media organization in this regard.

In this instance the MoIC also appeared to rebut the opinions expressed by the Ulema Council. A news report by a local news agency said the head of the program department in the Ministry and Information and Culture (MOIC) had said the opinion of the council was theirs and that they (the MoIC) could not stop TV channels from working. He was quoted as saying that while some movies shown on TV might not be suitable for this country's culture, there was a commission which had been set up to monitor this. He also said that anyone with a complaint should provide specific details of what was considered objectionable.

The Ministry official's stand on this issue is a welcome development since the lack of specific criticism in the past has left TV channels battling against ambiguous criticism without any opportunity to counter or defend themselves on specifics.

2. Kabul: Government Sets Up Another Media Commission:

With the powers and duties of the commission to monitor electronic media under challenge, the government decided this month to use its authority under Sections 20 and 21 of the Media Law to establish a media commission.

This Commission will have the power to issue licenses and allocate frequencies to radio and TV stations and "issue guidance" to owners of electronic media and "monitor the observation of the provisions of the media law by the media." According to the Deputy Information Minister Syed Hussain Aga Fazil Sangcharaki, this Commission will be more powerful than the earlier one which will report to it.

3. Takhar, North Afghanistan: Radio Takharistan threatened again:

Radio Takharistan, a local community radio station in Takhar province in northern Afghanistan has received threats about the musical programs it has been broadcasting. A listener's choice program which plays Indian, Afghan and Western music on the basis of listener's requests has drawn ire with unknown callers warning the station of dire consequences if the program is not stopped. The radio station's manager, however, believes the threats have less to do with the musical program and more to do with the station's broadcasts of critical investigative reports. The radio had recently done reports on land-grabbing activities in the area.

The station had earlier been threatened by members of the youth wing of Junbish, the political party of General Abdul Rasheed Dostum for daring to air a satire on their leader.

4. Jawzjan, North Afghanistan: AINA TV Reporter Beaten:

A TV station which is considered to be close to the northern warlord, Abdul Rasheed Dostum, found itself at the receiving end of hostile behavior as well. An AINA TV reporter was beaten up by the mayor's men in Shibergan, the capital of Jowzjan province—the hometown of Dostum—after the station telecast a report on the poor performance of the municipality. While the mayor claimed the incident was a result of the personal animus between the reporters and the municipality, the local police chief claimed the TV station was being punished for exposing the municipality's performance.

5. Media Law Redrafting:

A move to revise the media law has been initiated at the behest of the Ministry of Information and Culture. While it is too early to provide any specific details on the nature of the exercise, *Media Watch* has learnt that civil society, media organizations, international media NGOs as well as representatives of the Ministry are to be involved in the exercise to study and redraft the media law.

6. Tolerance Prize for South Asian Journalists:

The International Federation of Journalists has announced the annual Journalism for Tolerance Prize, open this year only to journalists from South Asia. The prize is open to journalists from Afghanistan and the details from IFJ are attached below:

JOURNALISM AWARD PROMOTES TOLERANCE, HUMAN RIGHTS

http://www.ijnet.org/FE_Article/newsarticle.asp?UILang=1&CID=302531

South Asian journalists whose work has helped oppose racism and discrimination are eligible for an annual prize.

May 31 is the deadline to submit materials for the Journalism for Tolerance Prize, organized by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). The goal is to promote a deeper understanding of the importance of tolerance, especially when it comes to minorities and differences of culture, ethnicity and religion.

This year the prize is open only to journalists in the South Asian countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Entries may be in English, Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Sinhala, Tamil or Urdu.

The competition is open to all kinds of media, including print, online, TV, radio and photography. The works should have been published or broadcast in 2004.

For more details, including rules and entry forms, visit [http://www.ifj-
asia.org/page/ifj_prizes.html](http://www.ifj-
asia.org/page/ifj_prizes.html) or contact Laxmi Murthy at ifjsouthasia@hotmail.com.

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