



Journalism Freedom Report v.6 Media Watch Afghanistan

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The month of May saw a particularly violent death of a former Tolo Television VJ, the young Shaima Rezayee. The death of the journalist (albeit she had left the TV station three months prior to her death) broke a long period when the country had experienced no journalist killings. Her colleague on the same music program, Shakeb Issar, has also been repeatedly attacked. Tolo itself, in the frontline of media attempts to push the boundaries of acceptable content, was criticized, its reporters threatened and the TV station in general maligned.

However, more positively, the pressures from the government on media organizations eased to an extent with the Ministry of Information and Culture seeking a more cooperative relationship with the media and media development organizations. The Ministry organized a seminar on media and elections where the Minister for Information and Culture, Sayed Makhdoom Raheen, said he would be happy to consider the reform of the media law. The watchdog body set up by the Ministry to monitor electronic media content, the Media Monitoring Commission, was brought under the newly set-up Media Commission and ceased to use arbitrary powers to summon and chastise media organizations.

Fallout of this is the apparent displeasure of the Ulema Council with the Afghan government. Critical of the government's unwillingness to respond to their repeated calls to reign in what they have termed "immoral content" on electronic media, the Ulema Council has decided it would set up its own TV station to impart Islamic values to the people.

Independent journalists are showing active initiative organizing themselves. Following months of legwork by a group of dedicated Kabul-based journalists, over 200 representatives from 15 provinces met in Kabul in June to elect office bearers to a new journalists association.

1. Shaima Rezayee: Victim of TV Profile or Gender Inequalities: Shaima Rezayee, who had worked as the young VJ of the popular music program 'Hop', on Tolo TV, Afghanistan's first independent TV station, was found dead in her home three months after she left the organization.

Rezayee was apparently killed from a close gun shot wound to her head in her own home on May 18.

While Journalist protection organizations criticized her death, terming it a blow for free and independent media in Afghanistan , Tolo TV said her death did not have anything to do with her status as a media employee.

The TV station said Rezayee had not only worked for a short period of 3 months in the TV station but that the death had taken place three months after she had left. There was no direct relation between her death and Tolo, the organization claimed, adding that Rezayee was fired for her inability to abide by the rules and regulations of the organization.

There have been suggestions that Rezayee's lifestyle was too modern and permissive for certain sections of Afghan society and may have led to her murder in retaliation by conservatives. Until now the Attorney General's office has not made public its findings and it is still not certain whether her death was a murder or suicide. Her two brothers, who were arrested earlier on the suspicions that her death was an honor killing, were released subsequently.

What lent a spine-chilling quality to the entire episode was the rumor of her death in early March weeks before her actual death. At that time the rumors suggested she had been murdered for her lifestyle. A few weeks later her death became a reality.

Whether her death was the result of her lifestyle or her public profile, it seems almost certain that both issues fed on each other, reinforcing the problems that many working women in Afghanistan face.

Tolo TV, whose directors and employees have been called in for questioning in connection with the case, said that while it was happy to cooperate with the ongoing investigation launched by the Attorney General's office, there was an element of harassment in the line of questioning. Tolo TV however also said that the AG had changed the investigating teams several times and that it was reserving its judgment on the outcome. A group of journalists from different media organizations have also come together to investigate the death.

2. *Tolo TV Continues to Face Pressures:* Tolo TV itself continued to face a variety of pressures in May and June. A program on a bi-weekly investigative show telecast in May caused the reporting staff to be repeatedly threatened. The program has focused on land grabbing by private individuals including members of the royal family. Following the investigations, reporters on the program—Daneshyar, Qiam and Nekzad—received telephonic threats from phone numbers which were traced as belonging to persons in the employ of the royal family. Investigations are ongoing.

3. *Shakeb Isar:* A young boy who shot to stardom as a VJ of the popular 'Hop' program on Tolo TV, found himself paying a steep price for his fame. While Tolo TV did commendable work, making Shakeb Isar a star, the rise of a Hazara (the ethnic community often considered to be at the bottom of the social ladder in Afghanistan) was disliked by some. Combined with the fact that the program itself was controversial, being considered too racy by conservative sections of Afghan society, Shakeb was repeatedly attacked and threatened.

Amongst the incidents documented, Shakeb was attacked while getting a haircut and protected his stomach with his hand. His hand was cut severely requiring over 12 stitches; Shakeb was kicked by local police on one instance and forced to sing for them on another occasion while travelling home (the police chief has changed since then, Tolo claims); his mother's car was vandalised; both Shakeb and Tolo received numerous threat letters; Shakeb was expelled from Kabul University; his car was forced off the road and crashed into a tree; groups of persons were found hunting for him in his car when he was not in it. This extensive series of incidents combined with the death of his colleague scared Shakeb into seeking refuge in the Tolo TV studio. After more than a month in hiding Shakeb was able to find an opportunity to leave the country for a safer place.

4. Ulema Council TV: Afghanistan 's Ulema Council (the central body of religious scholars) has proposed to establish a TV station. The Council which has been vocally critical of the content on electronic media, especially independent TV stations, claimed that the proposal had found favour with President Karzai who had promised his help.

The President's office said it had extended 'support' to the Ulema Council plans in keeping with its support to free media in Afghanistan . At the moment there was no specific plan to provide any other form of concrete support which might be considered at a later stage, a presidential spokesman clarified to *Media Watch* .

The Council said it had decided to set up its own TV station in view of the immoral and un-Islamic content on independent TV channels. Its own TV channel would guide people on the Islamic path, Council secretary Qiamuddin Kashaf told *Media Watch* .

Asked who was authorised to interpret what was Islamic or un-Islamic in the media, Kashaf said that the Holy Quran was not open to interpretation. He said the government authorities had failed to take action on the rulings made by the Council.

Asked why Ulema Council members did not take any action in their capacity as members of the Supreme Court of Afghanistan (Kashaf is a senior judge and the head of the Ulema Council Fazl Hadi Shinwari is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court), Kashaf said any complaints on the content of media programs violating the Constitution had to be directed to the office of the Attorney General for action.

5. Media Commission: *Media Watch* earlier reported about the establishment of a Media Commission under articles 20 and 21 of the Media Law. This month *Media Watch* interviewed the members of the commission headed by Musa Marufi to determine its role and perceptions.

The mandate of the commission will be to issue licenses and allocate frequencies to radio and TV channels, provide professional guidance to political parties for using radio and TV for publicity, guidance to owners of electronic media outlets in consultation with media directors and civil society professionals, monitoring the observance of provisions of the media law and determining a broadcasting policy for state-run radio and television stations.

The commission members articulated that they see reform of the state-run Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA) as their primary work. Chairman of the Media Commission, Musa Marufi, told *Media Watch* that the commission was established to administer and supervise the RTA and make it more responsive to new needs. As part of the democratization of Afghanistan , RTA will be for the people Afghanistan and not exclusively for the government, it will be a medium that will enable the government to explain its policies and also a medium available to the voices of the Afghan people, he said. The RTA would also have to become more competitive since it was facing new challenges from non-governmental media, Marufi opined.

The monitoring commission set up earlier will now report to this new commission. Senior figures in the Ministry of Information and Culture told *Media Watch* that there was some confusion over the powers and mandate of the monitoring commission previously established. Members of that commission had summoned representatives of electronic media to its office arbitrarily to criticise program content, a step that was outside its mandate.

The new commission headed by Marufi will now look into complaints against content of electronic media programs and advise the media organisations. It also has the authority to revoke the license of any media organisation that it feels is refusing to conform to the guidelines on programmatic content.

There are concerns however that the mandate of the commission may present a conflict of interest. The commission is expected to focus on making RTA competitive while also being the judge and jury on the program content of other channels in competition with RTA.

Incidentally, in addition to the Media Commission and the Media Monitoring Commission there is a third commission for media regulation. This commission is within the Ministry of Information and Culture and is headed by the Minister of Information and Culture.

6. Journalist Association Formed: Journalists in Afghanistan broke new ground with over 200 independent journalists meeting in Kabul to adopt a constitution and elect office bearers for the fledgling Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA). Supported by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) the organisation is making an effort to organise the deeply divided journalist community in the country. Several such attempts in the past have had to be abandoned because of deep-seated political and ethnic divides and currently several journalist organisations are in existence.

At this two-day meeting (June 17-18), the journalists, who attended from 15 different provinces, elected office bearers. However, a measure of the continuing deep divides was evident from the fact that the meeting spent a considerable amount of time debating whether the term 'Afghan' was inclusive or exclusive. More important than the solution was the sentiment that it captured. The divisiveness was also evident also from the fact that several groups of journalists stayed away from participating. However the meeting was an important first step towards organizing the community and the association may be able to overcome differences under the guidance and aegis of the IFJ.

7. Aftab Editor Attacked in Canada : A journalist who had fled Afghanistan two years ago after his reporting for the *Aftab* newspaper earned him a death sentence for blasphemy was attacked in Canada . Recently, Saed Mir Hussain Mahdawi, the editor of the publication, began publishing the paper from Canada . However, a few weeks ago he was attacked after speaking at the Pen Association of Canada function on the impact of 9/11 on Afghanistan . Mr Mahdawi however said that he could not identify his attacker. The attack left a deep wound on his face, requiring five stitches.

8. Pajhwok Reporter Threatened: A Herat-based reporter of the Pajhwok Afghan News agency said he was threatened by local government officials while investigating the kidnapping of a local school girl. The reporter claimed that the deputy head of the antiterrorism wing of the security police of the province asked the reporter to be careful, as there was "pressure from Kabul ".

The authorities denied that there was any threat to the reporter but said he had been bothering them with demands for information.

The Committee for Protection of Afghan journalists however pointed out that demanding information was the journalists' right.

9. Gang leader Suspected of 2001 Killing of Four Journalists Arrested: In June, the suspected leader of the gang which killed four western journalists in late 2001 was arrested by the police following a shootout in Sarobi, 50 km east of Kabul. Media organizations including the RSF hailed the arrest and asked the Afghan government to bring the accused to trial.

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