

# Afghanistan's Media Milestone

## Local Coverage of the Afghan Elections

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### Contacts:

Michael Dwyer  
Regional Manager for South Asia  
[mdwyer@internews.org](mailto:mdwyer@internews.org)

Charmaine Anderson  
Afghanistan Country Director  
[canderson@internews.org](mailto:canderson@internews.org)

**Internews Network**  
**Administrative Headquarters**  
P.O. Box 4448 • Arcata, CA 95518 • USA  
Tel: +1 707 826-2030 • Fax: +1 707 826-2136

**Washington, DC Office**  
1640 Rhode Island Ave. NW • Washington, DC 20036 • USA  
Tel: +1 202 833-5740 • Fax: +1 202 833-5745



## **Executive Summary**

Afghanistan's August 20, 2009 presidential and provincial council election represents a milestone in the development of Afghan media. The growth and increasing sophistication of Afghanistan's independent media is one of the clearest success stories of the last eight years of international aid. Given illiteracy rates up to 70%, broadcast media has been at the forefront, with FM radio stations now broadcasting in large and small towns around the country, and television becoming increasingly important in larger cities. Much of this expansion has occurred between the 2004 presidential election and today. Media serves many goals, but none more important than ensuring an informed electorate can vote for their leaders, hold them accountable, and have confidence in the future.

### **OVERVIEW**

With an embattled president facing 40 rivals, several of them prominent national figures, the media took the bull by the horns this two-month election campaign. By most accounts, a more experienced media did a better job covering the campaign and highlighting the key issues than five years ago. Many outlets ran special election programming, conducted interviews with candidates and organized live debates during which callers could ask questions of candidates. While there was substantive discussion of key issues, much programming on larger broadcasters focused on individual campaign events and some favoritism was apparent. Local media had less access to the candidates themselves, but were able to focus on the concerns of local communities. The 40-some local radio stations that are part of the Salam Watandar network were able to mix their own local coverage with Salam Watandar's daily national programming.

Security determined where presidential candidates could travel and how the media covered them. With one or two notable exceptions, the major candidates ran efficient press operations, making the candidates available for interviews and comment. For the most part, the presidential candidates stayed in Kabul before venturing out to the relatively more stable provinces during the second half of the official campaign period. As presidential candidates were restricted in their travel, the media played a critical role in informing voters, especially those in provincial, insecure and remote areas.

While the focus was, understandably, on the presidential race, elections were also held for provincial councils. Here local media played a large role, as these races were usually overlooked by the larger media organizations.

### **CONTENT OF ELECTIONS COVERAGE**

#### **Key National Issues**

Among a wide range of issues, seven stood out in the overall media coverage of the presidential election:

- Individual campaign events
- Deteriorating security
- Criticism of electoral system for allowing a multitude of candidates
- Misuse of government resources

- President Karzai's record
- Corruption
- The economy

### **Local Media Coverage**

Local radio stations provided extensive coverage of the presidential and provincial council races. In addition to their own local coverage, these stations broadcast morning and evening editions of the national current affairs program Salam Watandar, produced in Kabul. Other local media organizations also provided extensive election coverage, such as the Killid Group.

#### ***Salam Watandar***

In the run-up to the elections, Salam Watandar broadcast nearly 600 news stories, reports, interviews and programs about the elections, including:

- Daily profiles of candidates during the campaign period
- Investigations of major candidates' records
- Differences among candidates on key issues
- Breaking stories including illegal campaigning by a governor and government officials obstructing campaigning by other candidates; misuse of government resources for campaigning, campaign finance and vote-buying.

Salam Watandar also focused on the provincial council election, including a number of stories about key provincial council races largely ignored by other media and attacks on provincial council candidates. The program also followed the two women presidential candidates, aired one special weekly program about women and the elections and extensively reported on women provincial council candidates around the country.

Salam Watandar's 14-hour election day program was available to almost seven million Afghans. The schedule was a rolling presentation of news on the half-hour; interview packages on subjects such as youth, women, Islam, vote counting procedures, and the need to accept official results; panel discussions on subjects including electoral fraud; regular reports from partner radio stations around the country; audience call-ins; and briefings from the Independent Elections Commission.

#### ***Pajhwok Afghan News***

Pajhwok Afghan News (PAN), Afghanistan's largest news agency, has provided extensive reporting through its dedicated website, [www.pajhwokelections.af](http://www.pajhwokelections.af). PAN, established by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, is now an independent agency supported by the Open Society Institute and Internews. PAN maintains a Kabul newsroom, with bureaus and reporters around the country, supplying news in Dari, Pashto and English directly to other Afghan media, international media, the international community and the public.

PAN's website provided extensive election information such as candidate biographies, interviews, news and how to vote. Some top stories from the website on election day included:

- Violence fails to dampen voter enthusiasm in Zabul, Uruzgan

- Blasts in Kabul as media asked not to report violence
- Kabul residents brave Taliban threats
- Militant threats force closure of polling centres
- Taliban torch ballot boxes in Baghlan

### ***Tolo TV***

Tolo TV, operated by the Australian-Afghan Mohseni brothers, produced two innovative election-related programs that are especially worth noting. “The Candidate” was a reality game show targeted to a youth audience that allowed ordinary people to pretend they were candidates, working out their presidential platforms and traveling the country to “campaign.”

Tolo also produced a satirical program called “Zang-e-Khatar” (roughly translated as Danger Bell). On one episode, a fictional candidate declares, “A vote for me is a vote to destroy your future. If elected, I promise to serve myself first, then my relatives and friends, and then other people.... Votes from you mean foreign trips for us!”

According to Haroun Mir, director of Afghanistan’s Center for Research and Policy Studies, as quoted in the *Christian Science Monitor*, satirical shows “are taking on all the major issues new shows aren’t. Even in the presidential debates, the candidates were not truly pushed very hard or far in terms in terms examining their policies . . . Shows like ‘Zang-e-Khatar’ are able to pierce the traditional bounds of deference through the use of humor.”

### ***Local Media Snapshot***

Highlights from two stations provide a snapshot of local media election coverage:

- Radio Sul-e-Pagham in Khost  
The station broadcast: Ten panel discussion programs involving analysts, independent election commission representatives, youth and others; interviews with around 25 provincial council candidates; and public awareness programs explaining election processes. On polling day the station had five journalists reporting from different polling centers in the city, supporting studio-based analysts. The station also broadcast messages encouraging people to vote, announcing the locations for polling centers, and providing hourly news updates.
- Radio Rabia Balkhi in Mazar-i-Sharif  
In the campaign period the station broadcast: Five panel discussions in which analysts and provincial council candidates participated, especially the female candidates; regular current affairs programs that covered the daily issues; a weekly family program with women guests talking about women’s participation in the elections and encouraging family members to allow women to participate in elections. On election day, three journalists reported from polling centers for women and men, the station broadcast live studio programming with analysts, hourly news and opportunities for people to call-in about any irregularities, and a Turkmen-language program to encourage Turkmen to vote.

## **ASSESSMENT OF COVERAGE**

Afghanistan's official Media Commission noted improved media coverage in 2009, compared with the previous presidential election in 2004. The chairman of the Media Commission, Sidiqullah Tawhidi, told Salam Watandar, "Generally speaking, the Media Commission is pleased with the campaign coverage. Notwithstanding some media outlets' slanted reporting, the coverage was more extensive and informative than five years ago. Many outlets had special election programs, organized debates and in general did a good job. It shows that the media have matured and become more professional."

In widely reported remarks, the Media Commission noted earlier in the campaign that coverage of incumbent President Karzai had dominated the state-run newspapers and Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), while one private station was overtly supporting the candidate Abdullah Abdullah. Several new newspapers were launched in the days ahead of the campaign period specifically to campaign for one candidate or another and other television stations came to have a reputation for supporting particular candidates.

Despite these allegations, other key figures also had a positive view of the media coverage and the importance of media coverage in providing an accountability mechanism. The UN Special Representative, Kai Eide, told reporters at a press conference, "I would like to express my admiration to you for the way you have reported the campaign and for the way you have stimulated the mobilization of the Afghan population that is a tremendously important contribution to the strengthening of democracy in this country." The chair of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, Sima Samar, noted, "The role of media is very important and the media should play its role responsibly and record and report any fraud so the people can have confidence in the transparency of the elections."

## **THREATS AND RESTRICTIONS**

While the media has been able to do its job in many parts of Afghanistan, there were reports of intimidation by government and campaign officials, and areas affected by the insurgency are off-limits to most journalists. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International both reported instances of intimidation, with Amnesty citing a journalist in Ghazni saying, "People working on the Karzai election campaign are calling me and other journalists and threatening us if we report on corruption or anything bad that Karzai's government is doing. Taleban and other groups contact me and threaten me, telling me I must stop writing any positive news stories about the elections because they don't want people to support the elections. I am caught between these two sides." The local media development NGO Nai operates a media watch service and reports that so far there have been relatively few incidents of intimidation reported to them. More information will be available in Nai's monthly Media Watch report.

The surprise government announcements that the media must neither report on incidents of violence during polling hours nor attend the site of violent incidents was met with anger from Afghan journalists, disappointment from international press freedom groups and diplomatic representatives, and doubt from the UN over the legality of the decree. The President's Office claimed that the measures were in the interests of national security. Many international and Afghan media organizations chose to continue reporting all news. Pajhwok Afghan News, among the Afghan media that rejected the edict, reported on White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs

statement, “We have expressed our concern and displeasure about that policy and believe that journalists should have the freedom of access in fully covering the elections.” Aleem Siddique, a UN spokesman in Kabul told the Reuters agency, “It’s unclear to us what if any legal basis there would be for such a directive.” Reuters noted that incidents of police aggression against journalists increased from Tuesday. Shortly after midday on election day, some Afghan and international journalists were threatened and detained in Kabul at the site of a shooting incident.

## **TRAINING ELECTION REPORTERS**

Nai has provided training and mentoring for Afghan journalists throughout the elections process. Earlier training, funded through the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), focused on what journalists needed to know about the voter registration phase. More recent training, funded through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP ELECT), has provided reporters and editors with the skills they need to provide local communities with relevant, timely and accurate information. A total of 164 journalists and 40 media managers from locations around the country took part, as well as 158 members of civil society organizations.

During the training, journalists and editors showed acute awareness of the importance of their role in informing the public during the elections. One journalist attending the Kunduz training in northern Afghanistan said, “The transparency or non-transparency [of the elections] will be clearer, people will learn about candidates’ financial affairs, media can grow a stronger connection with the public through this process.”

In addition to one-off training events, the Nai program also provided mentoring. The manager of Radio Faryad in Herat planned a live radio roundtable on the provincial governor’s declared intention to form a 2000-strong armed civilian volunteer group to provide local security—a plan that raised considerable public anxiety. Nai’s senior trainer played the role of executive producer/consultant to the station manager, outlining an editorial plan whose outcome was premised on the public interest. The result was a successful panel discussion and call-in program that included the Governor’s spokesperson.

Khalil Amiri, Radio Faryad’s station manager, said that the training experience enabled him to offer listeners a greater range of election programming. “We produced twenty roundtables during the campaign period and program interviews with provincial candidates on their policy platforms and key authorities on election security. We also covered election day live,” he said.

Following her training from Nai, Herat-based journalist Nilah Akbari produced a program for BBC International Radio’s Persian service that encouraged Afghan women to participate in the election process, featuring interviews with women voters and female election analysts. She also produced television programming aimed at women for RTA Herat that explained voting day procedures and facilities for female voters.

To ensure journalists absorbed key information in a short time, training was focused, practical and interactive. Training covered the elections process, the players, the regulations – and the roles of the Media Commission and the Elections Complaints Commission. Journalists also needed to be confident about their responsibilities in reporting the elections accurately, impartially and fairly.

Bamyan-based reporter Karim Jawid, who works for the Dari-language service of German broadcaster Deutsche Welle, said, “I was not familiar with the elections procedures and offences and the media code of conduct.” Hassan Khaleqi, a journalist who reports for a private radio station, Radio Bamyan, said, “Media reports are very sensitive during an election period. We are the eyes and ears of the people. Our wrong reports can mislead society.”

The workshops also emphasised the need for media organisations to assume greater responsibility for their journalists’ safety when they report from the field. In Afghanistan, insurance is not available for local journalists, protection from police or the military is not guaranteed and journalists are often under-prepared when venturing into insecure areas.

Anita Kargar is the only woman reporting on security issues in Afghanistan’s northeast. She often travels with local military and police to cover stories. An armed bodyguard, her brother, travels with her. Kargar was an active participant in Internews’ training course in the northern city of Kunduz. The session on security helped her reconsider how she deals with “threats posed to journalists in insecure areas, journalists’ behaviour with security officials and opposition groups – and how to maintain impartiality.”

Internews, Salam Watandar and Nai receive core funding from USAID’s Office of Democracy and Governance.

## **CHALLENGES AHEAD**

Afghanistan’s media has come a long way. “In the past, it wasn’t possible to critique our leaders. During the first presidential election [in 2004], there were no private channels – just the national TV, which was pro-government,” Sidiqullah Tawhidi of the Media Commission told the *Christian Science Monitor*. “In the past, we had to rely on international channels to know what was going on, but now the local media offer a greater level of depth.”

Yet a journalist’s maxim is that you’re only as good as your last story. For Afghanistan’s local media, this means continuing to follow election stories and promises, contributing to the growing public of understanding of, trust in and commitment to the institutions and processes of democratic governance. It also means getting ready for the 2010 National Assembly election. In many ways this will be a more complex election to cover, with many candidates and with issues likely to play a more significant role than personalities. To ensure that the Afghan people get the professional, incisive, and reliable cover they need in the lead-up to next year’s election, Afghan journalists will require additional training and mentoring, and local stations will continue to need quality national programming to serve their communities.