



Afghan Journalists Safety Committee

Six-month Report

1 January- 30 June 2015



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- Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) recorded 39 cases of threat and violence against journalists during the first half of 2015, reflecting a decline by 43% compared to the first six months of 2014 during which 63 cases were recorded. One journalist was killed and another 4 wounded in this reporting period. Similarly, 19 journalists were beaten, 2 arrested and another 13 faced threats of varying natures. The improved working relationship between journalists and the media support organizations, enhanced coordination among media support organizations, and the support pledged by the leaders of the National Unity Government for journalists and freedom of expression could count among the reasons for the decline in the trajectory of violence against journalists in this period.
- Of the total 39 cases, 28 cases of threat and violence against journalists were caused by government officials making the government responsible for 72% of the cases of threat and violence against journalists. Taliban account for 12%, unidentified persons are responsible for 3% and local powerful individuals have been involved in 3% of these cases. The current rate of violence exercised by government officials is the record high in terms of percentage since AJSC began reporting three years ago.
- During this reporting period, the western region of the country has witnessed the highest number of cases of threat and violence (44%) while the Kabul region has experienced the lowest number (5%).
- The increased rate of violence caused by government officials is alarming. The government has the legal and moral obligation to establish safe working environment for journalists. However, this obligation seems drastically reversed in light of the fact that government workers are behind the majority of the cases of violence against journalists. Such an approach will further deepen the gap between journalists and the government thus undermining constructive cooperation between the media and the government in promoting good governance, fighting corruption and strengthening the democratic process.
- The distance between the government and journalists caused by violence against journalists has widened the space for the propaganda spread by the Taliban and other anti-state groups and elements— a trend that could prove destructive in the light of the fact that propaganda is a central tool behind the war strategy of Taliban and other insurgent groups. Government officials should see the media sector as a partner rather than an enemy. Confrontation with the media and journalists will only result in emergence of a negative-sum scenario that is harmful to both parties.

- Security forces continue to account for a remarkable portion of the cases of violence against journalists, which diminishes professional cooperation between journalists and security organizations, particularly law enforcement bodies. Security and defense bodies need to incorporate guidelines on treating journalists in the curriculum of the security forces and inform them of the rights and duties of journalists with regards to informing the public.

- The major achievements during the first six months of 2015 include endorsement of Access to Information Act, abolishment of the Media Violations and Complaints Assessment Commission, the support pledged by the president, CEO and the first vice president for media sector and freedom of expression. However, the leaders of National Unity Government have not fully delivered on their promises yet, which included taking meaningful measures to promote safer working environment for journalists, addressing the employment security of journalists and improving the relationship between the government and media sector. These are some of the matters to which both leaders of the national unity government vowed during the elections by signing a letter of commitment.

- Some of the female members of media outlets experience inappropriate, and in some instances, illicit behaviors. Such behaviors, which in some cases escalate to attempts of sexual abuse, leave the female staff members of media outlets helpless and vulnerable. More frequently occurring in provinces, this kind of behavior is one of the reasons behind the reduction of the women's presence in media sector. Media support organizations and the government need to take this issue seriously and female media workers should also report such cases to media support agencies.

With the reduction in international aid and the ensuing economic drawdown, majority of media outlets, especially those operating in the provinces, are struggling with economic challenges. The government ought to adopt measures to reduce costs for the media organizations such as decreasing electricity costs and government-related fees such as the fees pertaining to maintaining broadcast frequencies. If the government does not ease costs, many of the media outlets, particularly those operating in the provinces, will be left with no choice but to shut down.

- Over the recent years, the international community's interest in providing the much-needed financial and moral support for Afghan media and freedom of expression seems to have diminished. Given the role of media in solidification of democracy, good governance and human rights especially women's rights, it is necessary that the international community place support for media at the forefront of their strategic priorities. International community's silence towards press freedom can embolden elements opposing freedom of expression to further suppress media and freedom of expression.

2015 is just as much of a challenging year for Afghanistan as 2014. The extensive security challenges and internal political differences and disputes consumed the government to such an extent that it barely managed to pull off substantial other areas. Media and freedom of expression were also among the items the National Unity Government failed to deliver on following their commitment with regards to taking practical and meaningful steps to build on the achievements Afghanistan made in this area in the past decade. Despite all shortcomings, the last few months mark some constructive steps taken towards strengthening freedom of expression and ensuring journalists' safety as highlighted in the current and the previous report.

The major achievements during the first six months of 2015 include endorsement of Access to Information Act, abolishment of the Media Violations and Complaints Assessment Commission, the support pledged by the President, CEO and the first Vice President for media sector and freedom of expression. The emphasis placed by the President and the CEO on preserving and protecting the achievements of the last decade in the area of media and freedom of expression, as well as their multiple meetings with journalists and media managers are truly commendable. However, much more practical steps need to be taken to build on the country's achievements in the area of media and freedom of expression, which are considered Afghanistan's biggest achievements since 2001.

The current report is the fifth semiannual report by Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) reflecting journalists' safety circumstances during the first six months of 2015. Moreover, it briefly touches upon other safety related issues of journalists to ensure a thorough analysis of journalists' safety, thereby presenting a comprehensive picture of the same to the readers.

It is worth mentioning that recording of cases of violence against media workers has been done based on AJSC's policies and procedures. This means AJSC uses a specific definition for journalists and media workers; hence, it does not record the cases in which the legal status of the victim does not conform to the mentioned definition of Safety Committee.

Violence against Journalists during the First Six Months of 2015

Similar to last year, journalists and media workers continued to experience numerous challenges during the first half of 2015. The challenges ranged from facing violence exercised by various parties to difficulties in gathering information. While the number of cases of violence is lower in the first six months of 2015 compared to the same time period in 2014, violence against journalists continue to exist as a serious problem impacting journalists and the state of freedom of expression in Afghanistan.

During the first half of 2015, AJSC recorded 39 cases of threat and violence against journalists, reflecting a decline by 43% compared with the first six months of 2014 during which 63 cases were recorded. One journalist was killed and another 4 wounded in this reporting period. Similarly, 19 journalists were beaten, 2 arrested and another 13 faced threats of varying natures. The improved working relationship between journalists and the media support organizations, enhanced coordination among media organizations advocating for journalists' safety, and the support pledged by the leaders of Afghan National Unity Government for journalists and freedom of expression could count among the reasons for the drop in the trajectory of violence against journalists.

Of the total 39 cases, 28 cases of threat and violence against journalists were perpetrated by government officials making the government responsible for 72% of the cases of threat and violence against journalists. Taliban account for 12%, unidentified persons are responsible for 12 % and local powerful individuals have been involved in 3% of these cases. This is a record high percentage the government has ever held in relation to violence against journalists since AJSC began documenting cases of violence three years ago.

During this reporting period, the western region of the country has witnessed the highest number of cases of threat and violence (44%) while the central region has experienced the lowest number of such cases, i.e. 5%.

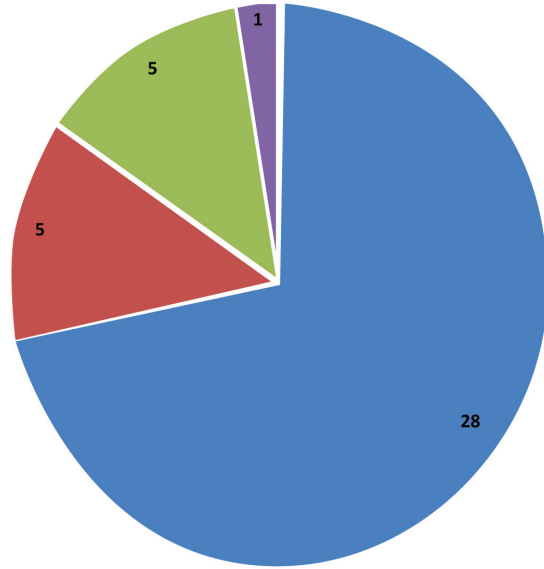
Government officials account for the majority of cases of violence against journalists followed by the Taliban and local powerful individuals respectively.

Based on AJSC analysis, the main reason behind the spike in violence against journalists by government officials lies in lack of attention of the government to prosecute the culprits, as well as in lack of meaningful laws to protect journalists. Despite the support pledged by leaders of the national unity government for media sector and freedom of expression, many government officials oppose the values of media sector and freedom of expression. Similarly, many members of the parliament have a hostile approach towards freedom of expression and are against its expansion.

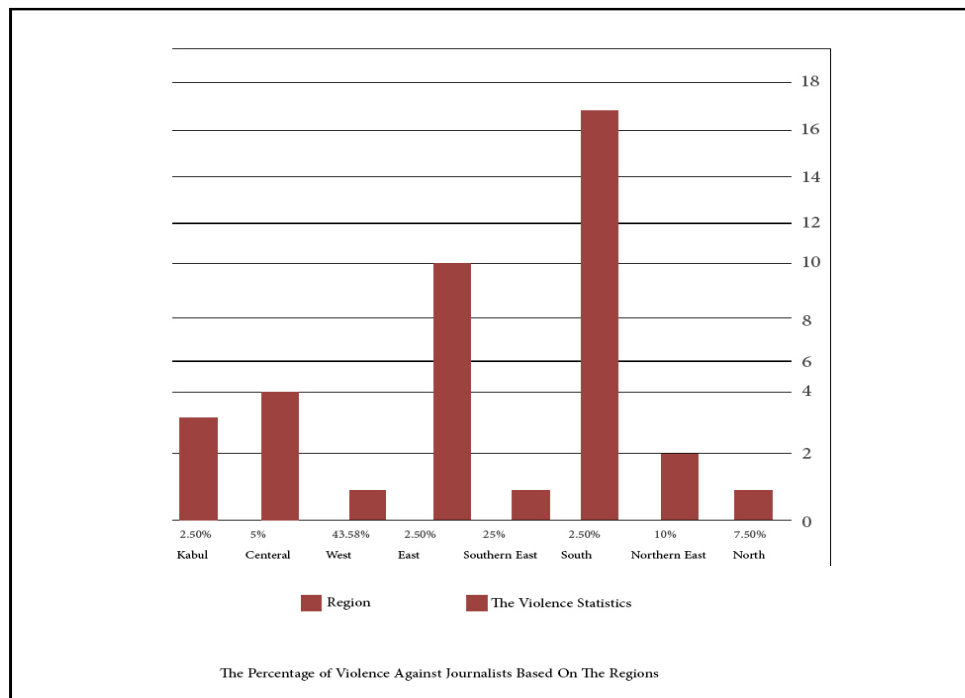
Table of Violence Statistics against Journalists

39 Cases in Total

Government	72 %
Taliban and suicide attacks	12.5 %
Unidentified individuals	12.5 %
Local Influential People	3 %



Graph I: The Perpetrators of violence against Journalists



The Percentage of Violence Against Journalists Based On The Regions

NO	Region	Name	Media	Duty	Type of Violence	Perpetrators	Date	Province	Description
1	East	Aqel Waqar	Radio Spinghar	Journalist	Murder	Unidentified individuals	16/1/2015	Nangarhar	Aqel Weqar, local journalist at Batikot district of Nangarhar Province was killed by unidentified gunmen. The cause of his murder is not known. He was known to develop investigative stories for a social development and legal aid agency.
2	Southeast	Ibrahim Rahimi	Radio Ashna	Reporter	Verbal threat	Spokesman to governor	17/1/2015	Khost	Ibrahim Rahimi, VoA correspondent had prepared a story on murder of an Imam in a mosque and had taken a quote from the spokesman to the governor. When the story was aired, the spokesman threatened him verbally saying why he was described as spokesman while he was deputy governor.
3	Southeast	Abid Ahmadzai	Radio Samoon	Reporter	Arrest warrant	NDS	17/1/2015	Khost	Abid Ahmadzai says NDS has issued his arrest warrant because of his stories. NDS claims the reporter has links with Hezb-e-Islami whereas the reporter dismisses these allegations.
4	west	Jamshid Hakak	Asia TV	Presenter and Re-porter	Beating and laceration	ANP	6/2/2015	Herat	Jamshid Hakak was on his way for producing a story where the police officers stopped his car for no reason and beat him following a verbal argument as a result of which Mr. Hakak was wounded in the mouth and face.
5	west	Elias Mousawi	Estiqlal TV	Technician	Beating and detainment	ANP	6/2/2015	Herat	Elias Mousawi was filming the police violent behavior with Jamshid Haka with his mobile phone where he was physically assaulted by a police officer and remained locked up at a police post.

NO	Region	Name	Media	Duty	Type of Violence	Perpetrators	Date	Province	Description
6	Central	Saifullah Maftoon	Pajhwork	Reporter	Threatening	Taliban	1/3/2015	Ghazni	Saifullah Maftoon produced a report on the Taliban torching a mosque in which several copies of Holy Quran were burnt to ashes. Subsequently, the Taliban threatened him telling him to remove the news from Pajhwork website or else be ready to bear the consequences.
7	Central	Saifullah Maftoon	Pajhwork	Reporter	Threatening	Taliban	18/5/2015	Ghazni	In a separate occasion, Saifullah wrote a topic about Qarabagh district chief Fazel Rahman in his Facebook page following which he was threatened by Fazel Rahman.
8	North-east	Habiburrahman Sherzai	Pajhwok	Reporter	Threatening	Unidenti-fied individuals	2015/3/4	Baghlan	Sherzai says he parked his car near his home and when he went a few footsteps away from his car a probably magnetic bomb attached to his vehicle went off as a result of which the car was destroyed but he survived the attack. He says the bomb was aimed to claim his life.
9	North-east	Mohammad Reza Ghafoor	RTA	Broadcast Manager	Breaking the camera	Police officers	2015/3/6	Takhar	Mohammad Reza Ghafoor says he saw a police car and a civilian car involved in an accident across from the TV station. He tried to vide-otape the scene but the police broke his camera. However, police says the camera was broken accidentally as the crowd gathered around the scene, thus the police was not involved in breaking the camera. Reza Ghafoori say his case has not been handled yet.
10	North	Atila Noori	Ariana TV	Reporter	Beating	Police officers	2015/3/15	Sarepol	Atila Noori says he was trying to film the scene of beating of a journalist at Sarepol in the city when he was also beaten by a police officer of the public order branch.
11	North	Yaqoob Madani	Pazhwak	Reporter	Beating	Police officers	2015/3/15	Sarepol	Yaqub was beaten by public order police officers at Sarepol province following a verbal argument and so far the case has not been resolved.

NO	Region	Name	Media	Duty	Type of Violence	Perpetrators	Date	Province	Description
12	Southeast	Aslam Qanooni	Radio Nan FM	Manager	Death	Bomb explosion	23/3/2015	Paktia	Aslam Qanooni, manager of Radio Nan FM was killed in a suicide attack near the gate of the radio station as a result of which the building of the radio station and nearby houses were also damaged.
13	Southeast	Latif Atef	Radio Nan FM	Reporter	Death	Bomb explosion	23/3/2015	Paktia	Latif Atef, reporter of Nan FM radio, was killed in a suicide attack near the gate of the mentioned radio station.
14	Southeast	Ahmadwali Sarhadi	Freelance	Freelance Journalist	Beating	ANP	28/3/2015	Zabul	Ahmadwali Sarhadi had aired a report on a civilian beaten up by police in Zabul province. Mr. Sarhadi says police summoned him to the police headquarters and when he got there, they beat him.
15	Southeast	Nasim Lewal	Shamshad TV	Reporter	Pressure on Main office	Members of parliament and provincial council	29/3/2015	Khost	Nasim Lewal, Shamshad TV reporter, says members of parliament and the provincial council put pressure on Shamshad TV to have Nasim Lewal report on any matter that benefits them even if it lacks value as news.
16	West	Amir Ahmad Modaqiq	RTA	Cameraman	Verbal argument and insult	ANP	29/3/2015	Ghor	Amir Ahmadi faced an insulting behavior and oral argument by police when he was trying to take photos of, and produce a story on, a car accident in which an ANP car was involved.
17	Southeast	Besmillah Arman	Shamshad TV	Reporter	Pressure	Janmir Zazai, provincial council	30/3/2015	Khost	Besmillah says Janmir Zazai put pressure on him in a phone call asking him to air stories in favor of the provincial council and introduce him a very good person.
18	Southeast	Mohammad Haroon	Pajhwok	Reporter	Threaten to refer to prosecution office	Chair of provincial council	31/3/2015	Khost	Mohammad Haroon says the chairperson of the provincial council threatened to file complaint against him at the prosecutor's office for his quotes used in the reporter's story. He claims not to have said those words while Mr. Haroon says he is in possession of a recorded version of his quotes.

NO	Region	Name	Media	Duty	Type of Violence	Perpetrators	Date	Province	Description
19	Southeast	Noorajan Baheer	Radio Killid	Reporter	Threatening	Members of parliament and provincial council	31/3/2015	Khost	Noorajan Baheer, reporter of Killid radio, says a number of the members of parliament and the provincial council threatened him that if they will not air the reports on corruption and protests in Khost province, they will put the active media outlets on fire in Khost which will also include radio Killid.
20	North	Homayoon Hamnawa	Radio Lahza	Reporter	Injury	Suicide attack	9/4/2014	Balkh	Homayoon Hamnawa was wounded while taking photos of a suicide attack on prosecutor's office
21	West	Khalil Amiri	Faryad Radio and TV	Chief Editor	Beating and insult	ANA, ANP and NDS officers	14/4/2015	Herat	Khalil Amiri faced physical assault and insult by police and national security officers while he was entering the celebration on occasion of Herat day.
22	West	Khalil Noorzai	VoA	Reporter	Physical attack and insult	ANA, ANP and NDS officers	14/4/2015	Herat	Khalil Noorzai faced insult and persecution by ANP, ANA and NDS officers while trying to enter the ceremony held to celebrate Herat day.
23	West	Naqiba Barekzai	Herat TV	Reporter	Physical attack and insult	ANA, ANP and NDS officers	14/4/2015	Herat	Naqiba Barekzai faced insult and persecution by ANP, ANA and NDS officers while trying to enter the ceremony held to celebrate Herat day.
24	West	Tareq Amiri	Radio Donya	Reporter	Physical attack and insult	ANA, ANP and NDS officers	14/4/2015	Herat	Tareq Amiri faced insult and persecution by ANP, ANA and NDS officers while trying to enter the ceremony held to celebrate Herat day.
25	West	Haseena Azimi	Mitra TV	Reporter	Physical attack and insult	ANA, ANP and NDS officers	14/4/2015	Herat	Haseena Azimi faced insult and persecution by ANP, ANA and NDS officers while trying to enter the ceremony held to celebrate Herat day.
26	West	Atefa Ghafoori	Radio Killid	Reporter	Physical attack and insult	ANA, ANP and NDS officers	14/4/2015	Herat	Atefa Ghafoori faced insult and persecution by ANP, ANA and NDS officers while trying to enter the ceremony held to celebrate Herat day.

NO	Region	Name	Media	Duty	Type of Violence	Perpetrators	Date	Province	Description
27	West	Habibullah Habibi	Herat TV	Reporter	Physical attack and insult	ANA, ANP and NDS officers	14/4/2015	Herat	Habibullah Habibi faced insult and persecution by ANP, ANA and NDS officers while trying to enter the ceremony held to celebrate Herat day.
28	West	Shafi Haidari	Herat TV	Reporter	Physical attack and insult	Kabul police	20/5/2015	Herat	Shafi Haidari faced insult and persecution by ANP, ANA and NDS officers while trying to enter the ceremony held to celebrate Herat day.
29	West	Mohammad Rafi Sena	Radio Zohal	Reporter	Physical attack and insult	ANA, ANP and NDS officers	2015-05-27	Ghor	Mohammad Rafi faced insult and persecution by ANP, ANA and NDS officers while trying to enter the ceremony held to celebrate Herat day.
30	West	Nazir Ahmad Shahrzad	Rahbord Weekly	Chief Editor	Phone threat	Unidentified person	2015-04-27	Herat	Nazir Ahmad was threatened by phone after publishing an article in Rahbord weekly. The chief editor of the weekly was accused of blas-phemy and publishing anti-Islamic contents and the
31	West	Ahmad Naseeri	Chakad TV	Chief Editor	Cut the power, threaten to shut down and move from the location	Haji Wa-heed, local influential person	2015-04-28	Herat	Haji Waheed initially cut the power of Chakad TV and then leveled accusations against the managing board and also wanted the TV station to be moved away
32	Northeast	Maghferat Shah Azari	Staff	Injury	Unidentified individuals	Unidentified person	10/5/2015	Kunduz	Maghferat Shah was wounded by an unidentified person while he was commuting from work. The motive of the raider is unknown.
33	Central	Kaliwal Niazi	1 TV	Cameraman	Beating	Kabul police	20/5/2015	Kabul	Mr. Niazi was beaten by police who also broke his camera while he was filming the suicide bombing at the parking of Ministry of Justice
34	West	Hassan Hakimi	Pajhwok	Reporter	Questioned by prosecution department	Ghor prosecution office	2015-05-27	Ghor	Hassan was questioned by prosecutor after publishing an article in social media about Ghor province judiciary

NO	Region	Name	Media	Duty	Type of Violence	Perpetrators	Date	Province	Description
35	Northeast	Shermo ham-mad Jahesh	Tanweer TV	Threaten to death	Ashequllah Wafa, MP from Baghlan	Ashequllah Wafa, MP from Baghlan	2015-05-27	Baghlan	Shermohammad Jahesh was threatened to death for unknown reasons by Ashequllah Wafa, but later on he offered apologies when the issue became public.
36	West	Ghulam-Ra-sool Habibzada	Radio Herat	Manager	Beating and theft	Unidentified individuals	28/5/2015	Herat	Mr. Habibzada was on his way from office to father-in-law's house when he was stopped by two motorcyclists at Falaka road who robbed his more than one hundred thousand cash, mobile phone and other personal belongings. The case was reported to police station 2 in Herat province and Majid Rozi, security chief of Herat province reported that one person was arrested and the stolen items were recovered.
37	southeast	Ashequllah Ekhlashyar	RTA	Manager	Beating	Border police	03-06-2015	Paktia	Mr. Ekhlasyar was beaten by border police on charges of passing police vehicle when he was driving to attend the inauguration ceremony of the new governor of Paktia province. The commander of border police offered apologies to Ekhlasyar later during the abovementioned ceremony
38	Southeast	Abdulmalik Hamrang	RTA	Reporter	Beating	Border police	03-06-2015	Paktia	Mr. Hamrang was also beaten by border police on charges of passing police vehicle when he was driving to attend the inauguration ceremony of the new governor of Paktia province. The commander of border police offered apologies to Ekhlasyar later during the abovementioned ceremony
39	West	Asadullah Jalalzai	BBC	Reporter	Beating	NDS	21/6/2015	Ghazni	While heading to his office, Mr. Jalalzai was beaten by an NDS officer for allegedly not allowing his body search. After the efforts of AJSC and instruction by the President, NDS provincial department in Ghazni province offered apology to Mr. Jalalzai and also suspended the officer's job.

Despite their deep rooted opposition with freedom of expression and media, the Taliban refrain from outright confrontation with the media because of the fear of being sanctioned by media. Taliban understand that it is of vital importance that their activities receive media coverage. This is most likely the reason why Taliban account for a relatively lower percentage compared to other parties.

Advocacy by AJSC

Advocacy towards creating a safe working environment for journalists forms an integral part of AJSC's activities. Much of advocacy activities of AJSC are geared towards bringing positive changes in the media and freedom of expression laws as well nurturing a supportive attitude in the government about media and freedom of expression—something many analysts see a great need for. AJSC's day-to-day activities are geared towards resolving cases of disputes and violence against journalists. To provide a sense of the results of AJSC's advocacy, two different cases are mentioned below:

The first case is about a journalist named Ahmad Wali Sarhaddi who was beaten up by the Chief of Police of Zabul province. After the mentioned case was brought to the attention of AJSC for help, AJSC immediately brought the matter to the attention of senior officials of the Ministry of Interior. After continued discussions of AJSC's Kabul representatives with the Interior Ministry about the case, the ministry decided to fire the Chief of Police of Zabul province.

In another instance, director of National Directorate of Security (NDS) of Ghazni province beat up a journalist in Ghazni province and the journalist shared the issue with AJSC. AJSC took immediate action and contacted various government officials from NDS office to the office of the president. Moreover, AJSC released a press release on the matter to draw the attention of the senior government officials. Upon receipt of the press release, the President personally took action after he obtained further details about the case from AJSC. The President ordered NDS General Director to suspend the position of the official involved and start investigation into the issue.

The Status of Freedom of Expression and Journalists in National Unity Government, and the Commitment and Actions of the government Leaders

Immediately after the establishment of the National Unity Government, the president endorsed the Access to Information Act—something he had promised to do by signing the media support Commitment Letter, which was developed by media support organizations during elections.

The Access to Information act was going back and forth between Ministry of Justice, cabinet and the parliament for over two years. Many believe president's move was aimed at elevating the new government's popularity by establishing close relationship with the media.

In a meeting with journalists and media owners, the Chief Executive Officer of National Unity Government also renewed the assurance of his support for media sector and freedom of expression stipulating that freedom of expression would be upheld as one of the biggest achievements of the last 13 years. Addressing the Media and Transformation Decade Conference, the CEO acknowledged the journalists' challenges and pledged to tackle them.

The CEO also promised to abolish the 'illegal' Media Violations Assessment Commission and to pave the ground for enforcement of Access to Information Act.

Subsequently, in October 2014, the first Vice President held a meeting with journalists, media owners and journalism support agencies in which he instructed the Attorney General's Office to revisit all cases of murder and injury of journalists which were not adequately addressed over the last 13 years, and announce the results. This decision by the first Vice President was also not void of enthusiasm and interest for journalists and media proprietors. However, the decision and instruction of the first Vice President has not been put in action so far.

Except for the leaders of the National Unity Government, most members of the government still see media as the government's rivals rather than a pillar that could help the government significantly in improving governance, rule of law, human rights and so on. This attitude has served as the source of numerous problems facing media and journalists, which range from attempts to limit freedom of expression to perpetuation of violence against journalists.

For instance, few months after the establishment of the new government, the office of the National Security Council sent a directive to the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) and through that to the provincial governments instructing the provincial officials to not speak with media about matters that fall outside of their scope of work. This letter became an excuse for provincial officials to deny information to journalists whatsoever. This matter gave rise to serious issues for media and journalists but was finally resolved to a certain extent as a result of intense advocacy by AJSC and other media support institutions.

The Accomplishments So far:

Among all the promises made by the leaders of National Unity Government, the promise to abolish the Media Violations Assessment Commission was fulfilled. The president endorsed access to Information act.

Matthew Rosenberg, the American correspondent, was allowed entry in the country during the first days of the new government. During the last presidential elections, Matthew was first barred from leaving the country but later on he was evicted and barred from reentry in Afghanistan.

Moreover, another progress made in this line was the order by the president which compelled government spokespersons to appear before media every working day at a certain time at the Government Media and Information Center's premise—a much needed decision considering the fact that access to information was becoming a growing concern among journalists.

The newsletter released by government media center read that spokespersons and certain other government officials, including representatives of ministries will be available to respond media inquiries on security and other important issues.

So far only the spokespersons from Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior and National Department of Security have abided by these guidelines while other government institutions have not yet shown much interest.

Yet, apparently government leaders are still serious about supporting freedom of expression, media and journalists. However, the lower ranking government officials are not only reluctant about maintaining and supporting access to information and media they also have tendencies to repress them.

Many analysts believe the main reason behind reluctance of government officials to provide information is to conceal information about corruption and other mismanagements that take place in government offices.

In general, there is hope for improvement of relations between the government and the media. However, it mainly depends on how serious the leaders of the government pursue this goal.

Quality of Reporting of Media

Although a decade has passed since the establishment of many media outlets, the quality of reporting has not witnessed significant boost. There is very little efforts in producing investigative reporting and following up issues of high importance such as cases of mismanagement and corruption.

Overall, the reasons for lack of elevation of journalism and production of socially constructive content can be listed as following:

Economic Constraints

Economic stressors are an important cause barring local media from producing quality content. These two are, indeed, directly related to each other. Economic downturn in a media organization is inevitably followed by lowered quality. Frankly, professional work in a media outlet requires, among other things, economic boosters. Now, given the diminishing trend of international aid to Afghanistan, media have faced additional economic hardship as either direct or indirect beneficiaries of the mentioned aid.

Many media organizations have implemented downsizing or have reduced the salaries of their staff over the past two years – a trend that has left a negative impact on the quality of work of the media. For instance, in many cases journalists have to undertake alone a task that would ordinarily be undertaken by a group.

Plenty examples exist of journalists who do videotaping, sound recording, editing and other associated tasks at the same time while they are not professionally trained for all of these different functions meaning that the final output will not sound and look professional.

Moreover, media organizations are more likely to recruit less professional workers who are not expensive. They are workers who have neither professional know-how nor individual talent. Their sole advantage is their low price. Some even work for free. It is obvious that the outcome should not be anything more than an unprofessional and low quality work.

Weak Educational System

The educational system of journalism in Afghanistan is extremely outdated. While journalism as a branch of social science needs to be updated regularly from a technical and academic perspective, many topics of the curriculum in the Afghan journalism faculties belong to previous decades.

While other parts of the world continuously update the way journalism work in order to attract more audience, Afghanistan remains far behind in this contest. This is the reason why Afghan local media fail to compete with international media.

One should also not forget that journalism comes from a blend of knowledge and art. Absence of any of these two components can seriously undermine the quality of the output. Those who have the professional knowledge of the profession but cannot add art to it, will still produce low quality work.

Lack of Competition among Media Outlets in Terms of Reporting

This has caused media not to adopt strict measures to improve quality of their reporting. The majority of media organizations continue to structure news in the traditional way and make no efforts to produce features and documentaries.

Insecurity

News is usually defined as 'News is what someone somewhere does not want others to know about, anything other than this is mere publicity.'

If we use this definition as an indicator for quality reporting, the insecurity surrounding the work of journalists can be considered as one of the important factors for low quality work. In many cases journalists commit self-censorship from fear of threats to their lives. As a result, they have nothing to offer other than publicity as the above definition states. For example, investigative journalism is not yet grounded in Afghanistan and very few media outlets produce investigative reports. The reason is either the media outlets cannot afford such reports or cannot dare to publish them.

The High Rate of Media Dependency

Media outlets established for political purposes are abundant and when a media outlet belongs to a politician, the sole purpose it serves will be the interests of that particular individual and his/her party. Journalism is basically characterized by impartiality. When this principle is violated, one cannot expect quality work.

Such media outlets feel more accountable to the funder and his/her party than the people. This is the main reason for low quality content of these media outlets and throws the mandate of the media outlet into question.

Taking the above-mentioned issues into consideration, one cannot expect changes in the quality of the work of media outlets in the short term as tackling each of these issues requires time and strong will.

Constraints and Sexual Discrimination Facing Female Journalists

Sexual discrimination and harassment of girls and women in Afghanistan is an extremely shocking and ominous phenomenon that clearly contradicts all social, religious and cultural values. Unfortunately, this evil phenomenon has made its way from streets to offices including, again unfortunately, media organizations.

Female journalists in all provinces remain extremely vulnerable and are facing serious problems from this perspective. To expand our knowledge about the matter, AJSC's two-member team including the female coordinator traveled to Herat and Balkh—two provinces that enjoy high number of media outlets. Having interviewed female reporters, our team found out the challenges they were facing was more serious than we expected.

Women's challenges ranged from work related discrimination to sexual harassment and inequality between men and women's activities. Herat province presents a challenging environment for women's activities especially female journalists. They work more than men but get paid less than them.

The acute and relatively hidden challenge facing women in Balkh province is the tendency on the part of male managers to force female employees into submission to sexual intercourse.

Many of the girls and women engaged in journalism enumerated their complaints as follows:

They say Herat and Balkh provinces present a variety of challenges to women. While in other provinces female journalists face challenges in private media organizations, in these two provinces a number of managers of public media outlets try to abuse women. A female journalist, on condition of anonymity, told us she had to quit her job at a private media outlet due to prevailing attitude on the part of her male employers to make illegitimate requests. She adds that once a girl works in a media, when she leaves the media organization and wants to join another, she faces straightforward requests for sexual favors right from the beginning. If she refuses the request for sexual favor, she will not be able to get the job.

According to her, some employers even address the applicant with the following sentence: “You definitely had affairs going on with your previous employer; you have got to keep the same affair going on with us here.”

Another woman who also wanted to remain anonymous said she had to quit her job at a media outlet and stay home due to unacceptable environment in the media outlet she was working for. She says: “I prefer to stay home and hide my talent in journalism than being sexually exploited.”

Ms. Khalida Khorshand, Chief Editor of Radio Mardom and human rights activist in Herat province confirms the existence of moral corruption in some media organizations and that women are used as tools in some media outlets.

Ms. Khorsand adds: “Women’s presence in media is not a real presence as they are used primarily as decorating items. They are not appointed to management positions, thus women fail to progress.”

“In many cases women are sexually exploited and are compelled to surrender to sexual demands of their managers if they wish to maintain their job,” elaborates Ms. Khorsand. Actresses are going through the same situation as female journalists in Herat province. An actress, on condition of anonymity, reveals that women are approached with demands of sexual favors and if they do not surrender to those demands, they will not only lose the role but will also be labelled as morally corrupt, mostly by their male seniors. Women in Herat province are more insulted by their colleagues than strangers.

There are seven official posts within Herat Theatre all of which are occupied by men. Female journalists in Balkh province also experience the worst circumstances in terms of job security. Powerful individuals, media proprietors and managers are behind such corruption. But no one responds to the voice of the girls and women who are facing these problems because many of those corrupt people enjoy support of the senior government officials or are the relatives of the provincial governors. As a result, women have to suffocate their own voice.

A girl who works in a private TV station says on condition of anonymity that abuse of female workers has become a culture in some media organizations. When I was approached with a request of sexual nature and I refused it, they first cut down my salary. Similarly, several other journalists from other TV stations also have similar complaints. They say, seeking support from any advocacy institution costs them their own and their family’s social stigma, let alone the threats they receive from local officials and powerful individuals.

Based on AJSC’s findings, the following are the main reasons behind underrepresentation of female journalists in media, especially in the north, is caused by the following:
and later on created so many obstacles around my work that I had to quit my job. Yet I did not seek help from any advocacy organization from fear of social stigma.

Similarly, several other journalists from other TV stations also have similar complaints. They say, seeking support from any advocacy institution costs them their own and their family's social stigma, let alone the threats they receive from local officials and powerful individuals.

Based on AJSC's findings, the following are the main reasons behind underrepresentation of female journalists in media, especially in the north, is caused by the following:

1. Households are not interested in seeing their female family members to appear on TV screen or be heard on radio, or be labeled as journalist because media outlets evoke an undesirable image in the minds of people. There is still social stigma around this issue.
2. The second issue is unpleasant working environment for women including sexual harassment.
3. Female media workers are also under bigger security threat in the provinces because of the Taliban and conservative elements of the society.

Traditional approaches, discrimination and lack of support for women in media are additional challenges surrounding the work of female journalists in Afghan media outlets. Despite all these challenges, female journalists still try to play an important role in media. They could play a more effective role if the current obstacles are removed.

Challenges Journalists and Media Organizations Face in the Provinces

Challenges for media workers is much greater in provinces compared to Kabul. In general, the more remote the province, the higher the challenges. Because of increased presence of the Taliban and warlords in the countryside, journalists face more security threats. Due to the less presence of civil society and media support organizations in the provinces compared to Kabul, they face more threats from the government officials in the provinces. There is also enhanced problems in the provinces with regards to the employment rights of journalists. Many media outlets do not abide by the contractual requirements including respecting the terms for payment of salaries or termination of contracts.

Journalists work in provinces for much lower salary and scarce resources in comparison to Kabul. In the past six months, a sizable number of provincial media workers have lost their jobs and others suffered salary cuts ranging from 30 to 50 percent as a result of economic constraints and curtailment of international aid.

For instance, around 90% of radio and TV stations in the northern region owe several years of their annual frequency fee to the government. To add to the vicious cycle, each year's nonpayment is also coupled with 100% cash fine.

Electricity is another major issue facing media. Media outlets are required to pay 13 AFN per Kilo Watt which is a cumbersome amount for local media to afford, and puts them under huge economic stress. Paying this much money for electricity is burdensome for low-income media whose entire income comes from a few local advertisements. This issue further impacts the media outlet's economic wellbeing and prompts the media owners to save money from staff salaries to afford the operational expenses.

Media owners want to be allowed to pay 7 AFN per KW just like other industries in the country. On the other hand, media organizations are required to pay taxes to the Ministry of Finance, which is another area media proprietors have reservations about. On top of this, media have to pay the AISA annual license fee too, while this license should not be a requirement for media because media obtain their license from Ministry of Information and Culture. Alongside the AISA license, media organizations are also required to be licensed by Ministry of Commerce. The proprietors of media organizations argue that local media do not need these two licenses because they are not importing anything. The abovementioned challenges join hands to make it hard for media outlets to survive and then it is the staff body of the media pay the price of any economic setbacks.

Abolition of Media Violations and Complaints Assessment Commission

One of the most important and effective measures taken by the National Unity Government was abolition of the Media Violations and Complaints Assessment Commission as promised by the CEO of the government, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah.

“Pursuant to the provision of Article 42 of the Mass Media Law, Ministry of Information and Culture decided to end the work of Media Violations and Complaints Assessment Commission, and take urgent action to establish a Mass Media Commission in consultation with media support organizations and journalists and in light of the provisions of the law in order to improve the affairs related to mass media sector in the country,” Ministry of Information and Culture announced in a newsletter.

In addition to creating hindrances for journalists, the Media Violations and Complaints Assessment Commission was also questionable from the organizational structure standpoint because the current media law provides for a Mass Media Commission with striking similarities with the current commission in terms of mandate and role.

Meanwhile, many journalists and media experts believe that this commission was mainly used as a tool by the former government and Minister of Information and Culture to silence media and journalists. They believe this commission's approach towards media issues was mostly informed by political decisions rather than actual violations.

The fact that Minister of Information and Culture was the chairperson of the Media Violations and Complaints Assessment Commission was a big question mark as to the fairness of this commission. The abolishment of this commission can be a great step ahead towards reducing challenges created for journalists by the establishment.

Establishment of the Commission for Overseeing Access to Information Act

Another big achievement of the National Unity Government was its endorsement of Access to Information Act during its first days.

Access to Information Act enables not only the journalists but also the entire nation to question the government officials on their performance and obtain the information they need.

According to some journalists, though this law was approved following lots of difficulties, around 20 flaws have been identified in it, the following three of which are considered critically important:

- The law provides for the right to access information from public bodies while it remains silent about private entities.
- Regarding establishment of the Commission for Overseeing Access to Information Act, AJSC recommended that the commission should be independent and should not operate under any government body; however, the government dismissed the recommendation for budgetary reasons.
- The law says information that is sensitive to national interests cannot be given to requesters. Afghan laws or the constitution has not defined the term “National Interest” so it opens the door for denial of information under the pretext of national interest.

Following endorsement of Access to Information Act, Ministry of Information and Culture set up the “Commission for Overseeing Access to Information Act” on July 6th, 2015 to oversee implementation of this law. The mentioned commission has 13 members to include the chairperson and deputy chairperson. The commission is comprised of two representatives of media community, two representatives from civil society as well as representatives from national department of security, ministry of information and culture, Afghanistan Bar Association, Chambers of Commerce and Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

- Despite all of the challenges facing journalists, the first six months of 2015 was a better time compared with the same time period in 2014 when it comes to threats and violence against journalists.
- The support pledged by leaders of Afghan Unity Government for media deserves applause. However, this support should be proven in practice. Despite such claims of support, the government officials still account for the majority of cases of violence against journalists, which is unacceptable for the media community.
- The increased rate of violence and intimidation by government officials is alarming. The government has the legal and moral obligation to establish safe working environment for journalists. However, this obligation seems drastically reversed in light of the fact that the government itself is behind the majority of the cases of violence against journalists. On the other hand, such an approach will further deepen the gap between journalists and the government and will further hinder cooperation in the areas of good governance, anti-corruption, strengthening the democratic process and shaping the public mindset.
- The distance between the government and media outlets has expanded the space for infiltration of propaganda spread by the Taliban and other elements who sabotage the government and its drive for development – a trend that harms both the government and the media. Government officials need to see the media sector as a partner acknowledging the power vested in it since media form an integral pillar of the open and democratic society.
- Security forces continue to account for a remarkable chunk of the cases of violence against journalists which diminishes professional cooperation between journalists and the security organizations. It will also create a hostile environment where journalists will embark on destroying the government and in return the government will further repress media—a vicious cycle which will be destructive to both parties. Security organizations need to incorporate guidelines on treating journalists in the curriculum of the security forces and inform them of the rights and duties of journalists. This can alleviate the trend where much of the incidences of assault against journalists by the police happens in the crime scene following terrorists accidents.
- Media organizations should take strides to improve their quality and produce contents conducive to growth and consolidation of a democratic society. While investigative stories are key to fighting corruption and improving good governance in the society, Afghan local media rarely bother to produce investigative stories.

- Access to Information Act presents some serious flaws. Should the government not take action to rectify those flaws; the effectiveness of the work of the commission for overseeing the implementation of this law will remain minimal. To enhance the effectiveness of the law, the President should issue a legislative order to bring the needed amendments in the law. Given the workload of the commission, term of office for its members should be permanent.
- Some of the female members of media outlets experience inappropriate, and in some instances illegitimate behavior. Such behaviors, which in some cases escalate to attempts of sexual abuse, leave the female staff members of media outlets helpless and vulnerable. More frequently occurring in provinces, this kind of behavior is one of the reasons why women's presence in media sector is fading out, especially in the provinces. The government needs to take this issue seriously and the female journalists should also report cases of abuse to journalists' support agencies in case they face such challenges.
- With the reduction in international aid and the ensuing economic drawdown and the political instability, the majority of media outlets, especially those operating in the provinces, are struggling with economic challenges. The government ought to adopt measures to decrease electricity bills and government fees such as the frequency fee. If media outlets are not supported in these lines, many of them will be left with no choice but to shut down especially in the provinces.
- Over the recent years, the international community's interest in providing the much-needed financial, political and moral support for Afghan media and freedom of expression seems to have diminished. Given the role of media in consolidation of democracy, good governance and human rights especially women's rights, it is advisable for the international community to place support for media at the forefront of their strategic priorities. Silence of the international community towards press freedom causes the opposing elements to suppress this phenomenon more vigorously.
- The international community and organizations supporting media sector should adopt measures to ensure close coordination with each other and with Afghan beneficiary organizations. Stronger coordination amongst these bodies is prerequisite to improved effectiveness of the work of media support organizations.