

Year 2019

AJSC

AFGHAN JOURNALISTS SAFETY COMMITTEE

کمیته مصونیت خبرنگاران افغان
د افغان خبريالانو د خونديتوب کمیته

Annual Report

— 2019 —

Afghanistan Journalist safety Committee

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Preface

2019 was a crucial year for Afghanistan. Despite unprecedented peace efforts, level of violence escalated in the country, leaving its impact on journalist safety and the state of coverage of events by the media. Although the challenges created by the escalating violence towards comprehensive coverage of incidents did restrict the reach of media to cover events that took place in the volatile parts of Afghanistan, the media managed to effectively cover the two main happenings of 2019, which were the presidential elections and the peace talks. In spite of the overall escalation of violence, Afghan Journalists Safety Committee's findings reveal that the level of violence against journalists and media workers has declined in 2019. Unlike previous years, in 2019, Afghanistan was not the most dangerous country for journalists. However, journalists and media workers are still prone to different types of violence and threats giving rise to the need to assemble every effort possible to mitigate violence and further improve the safety situation of journalists and media outlets.

In general, the country faced a financial crisis in 2019 affecting the media badly and causing 40 media outlets to close their offices. Likewise, 409 journalists and Media workers were forced to go unemployed. On the other hand, as part of commitment towards bettering media and the freedom of speech in Afghanistan, 25 new media outlets were established.

Afghan Journalist Safety Committee (AJSC hereafter), as Afghanistan's leading entity working towards press freedom and journalist safety, prepares annual and semi-annual reports on safety of journalists and the state of press freedom in Afghanistan. This is AJSC's 12th report, which covers countrywide incidences of violence and threats against journalists and depicts major happenings with regards to freedoms of press and expression.

Beside discussing the state of violence against journalists and media workers, this report briefly discusses the situation of journalists and media and the status of press freedom during the life of the National Unity Government (NUG), with a close focus on the pledges NUG made to media community with regards to improving safety of journalists, press freedom and access to information. Moreover, the recommendations and requests of media

Methodology

AJSC has been producing reports on the state of journalist safety and press freedom since 2013. AJSC exercises rigorous guidelines, policies and procedures in terms of identification and collection of cases of violence against journalists from Afghanistan's 34 provinces. In these guidelines, key terminologies such as journalist, media worker, violence, threats and perpetrators are well defined.

AJSC maintains a representative or focal point in each province who document the cases based on the policies and procedures provided to them by the organization's headquarter in Kabul. AJSC uses clear guidelines as to what constitutes a case of threat or violence against journalists. This means AJSC does not document those cases of threat and violence that are not related to the professional work of journalists. The collected cases go through a second layer of verification by the Kabul office and then inserted into the organization's database. National and international organizations can use AJSC's reports to learn about the safety status of journalists, media workers and media outlets in Afghanistan and develop their advocacy policies and support programs accordingly. Besides, AJSC provides these reports, and more specifically the cases of violence against journalists and media workers, to the international journalists' advocacy organizations, who use the data to inform their support programs to journalists and media outlets. International media/journalist support organizations can also use AJSC's documentation for vetting cases of violence against journalists. The reports are produced in three languages of English, Dari and Pashto and distributed to media community and other stakeholders.

Cases of Violence against Journalists in 2019

During 2019, AJSC has recorded 105 cases of violence against journalists and media workers, which includes 5 cases of murder, 18 cases of injury, 12 cases of physical assault, 33 cases of verbal abuse, 25 cases of intimidation, 7 cases of kidnapping, one case of illegal behavior and one case of illegal expulsion from duty.

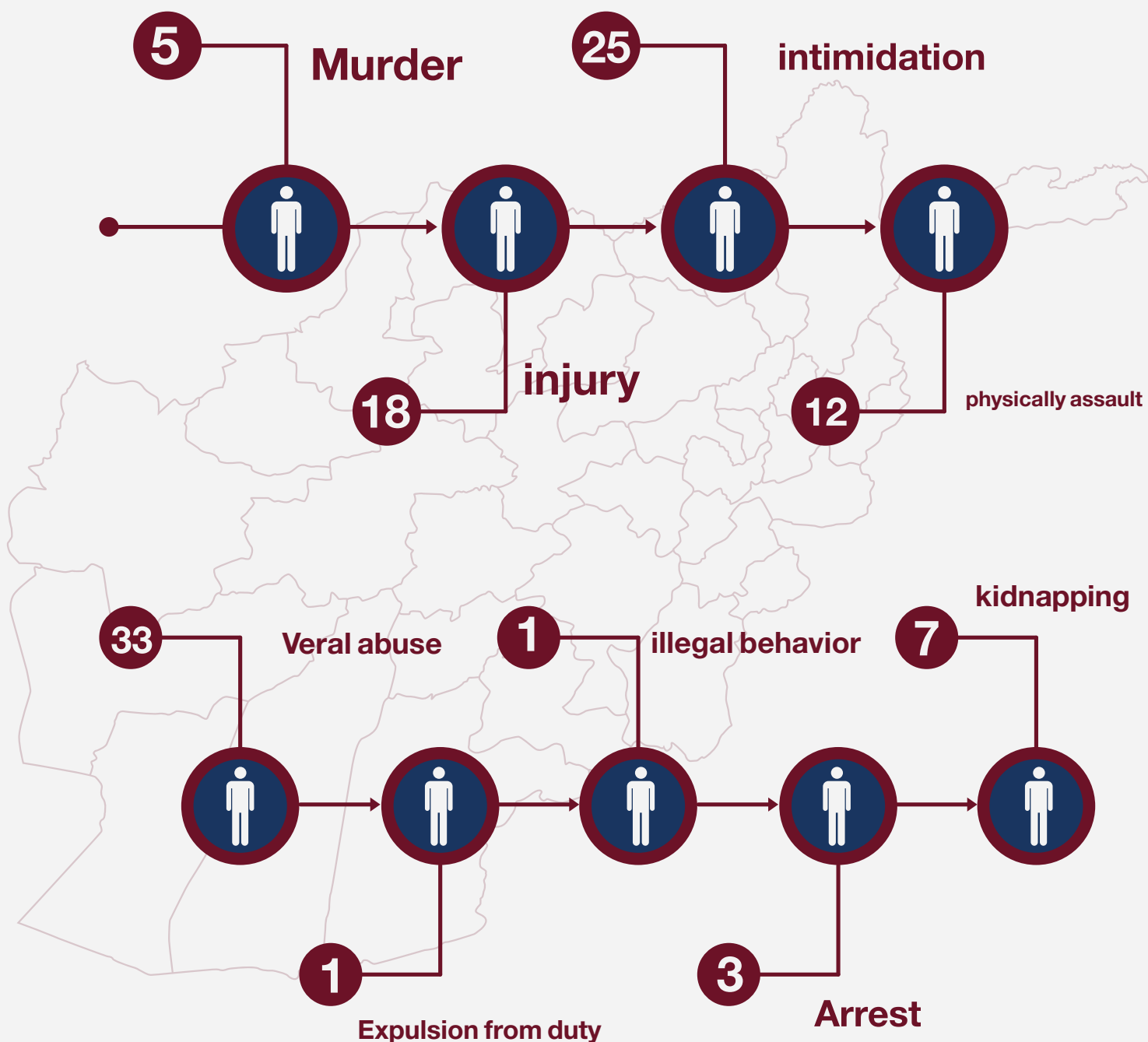
Cases of murder (5 cases) show a 71% decline as compared to last year, as in 2018, AJSC had recorded 17 cases of murder. Out of 5 cases of murders, Taliban are responsible for 2 cases, Daesh is responsible for one case and strongmen/warlords are responsible for the remaining 2 cases.

The overall cases of violence against journalists in 2019 (105) cases, show 13% decline compared to last year, as in 2018, AJSC had recorded 121 cases of violence against journalists and media workers.

Unlike the previous year, individuals affiliated with the government are responsible for majority of the cases of violence, namely 42 cases. Taliban come 2nd, as they are responsible for 33 cases. Being responsible for 14 cases, unidentified individuals rank 3rd. Strongmen/warlords are responsible for 7 cases, Daesh 4 cases, thieves one case, rank 4th, 5th and 6th respectively. Media managers are responsible for 3 cases of illegal and unacceptable behavior. Out of 105 cases of violence, female journalists and media workers fall victims for 18 cases.

Majority of the cases of violence, which constitute 30 cases, took place in southeastern region of the country. Southern province with 16 cases ranks 2nd. Eastern provinces have witnessed the least cases of violence – merely 6 cases.

« Violence against journalist in 2019 »



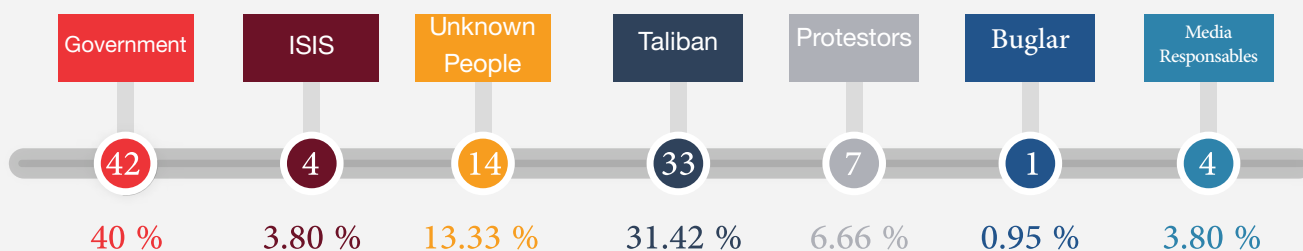
« Percentage of zone lases and perpetrators in 2019 »

2018 2019

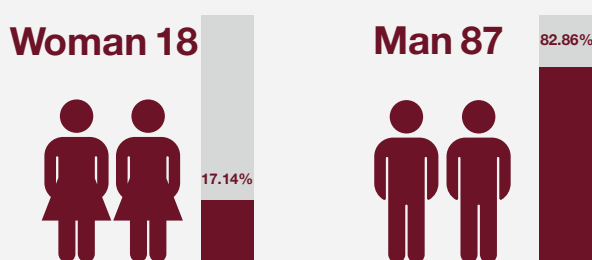
Total cases	Percentage of Difference			
Murder	17	5	70%	Decrease
Injury	23	18	20%	Decrease
Veral abuse	21	33	43.47%	No change
Physical assault	38	12	42.85%	Decrease
intimidation	1	25	34.2%	Decrease
Expulsion from duty	5	1	%	No change
Arrest	1	3	40%	Decrease
Kidnapping		7	85.72%	

The percentage of cases indicates a 13.22 decline, as compared to that of 2019

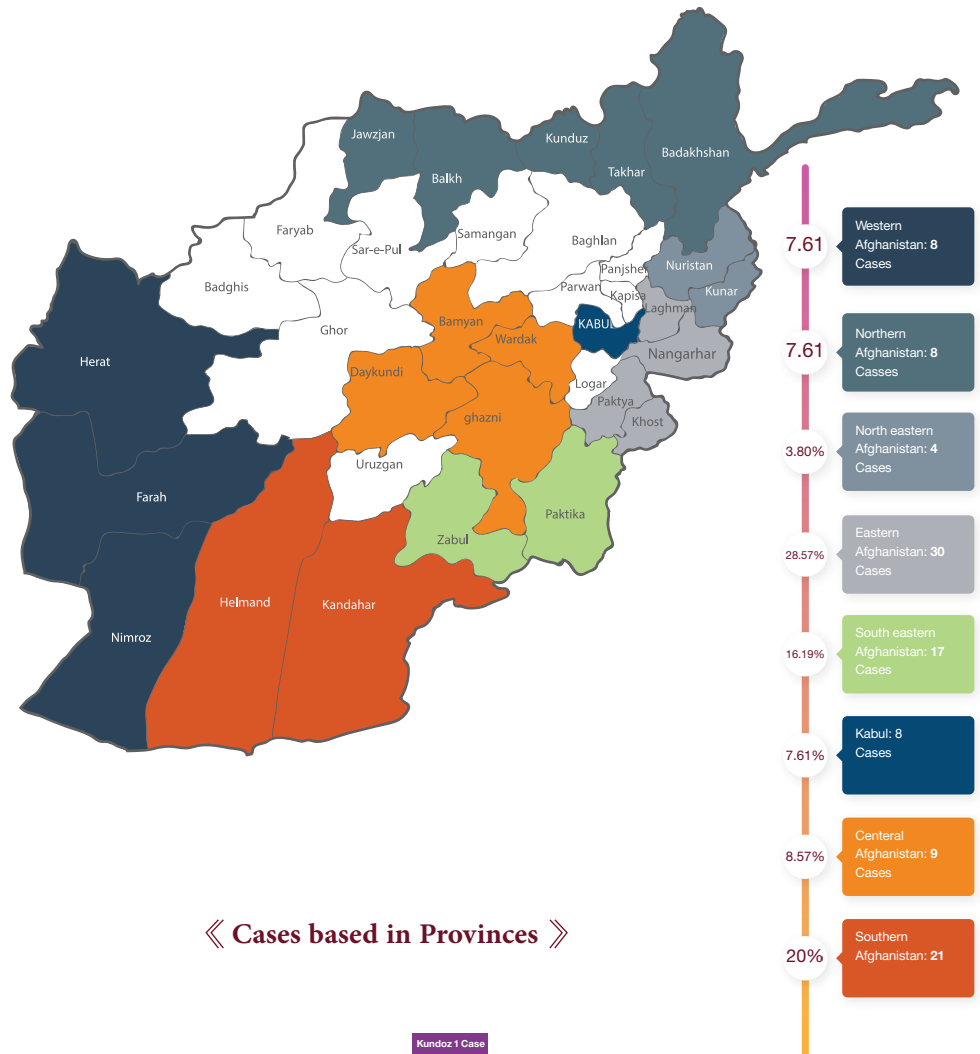
Perpetrators of Violence
2019



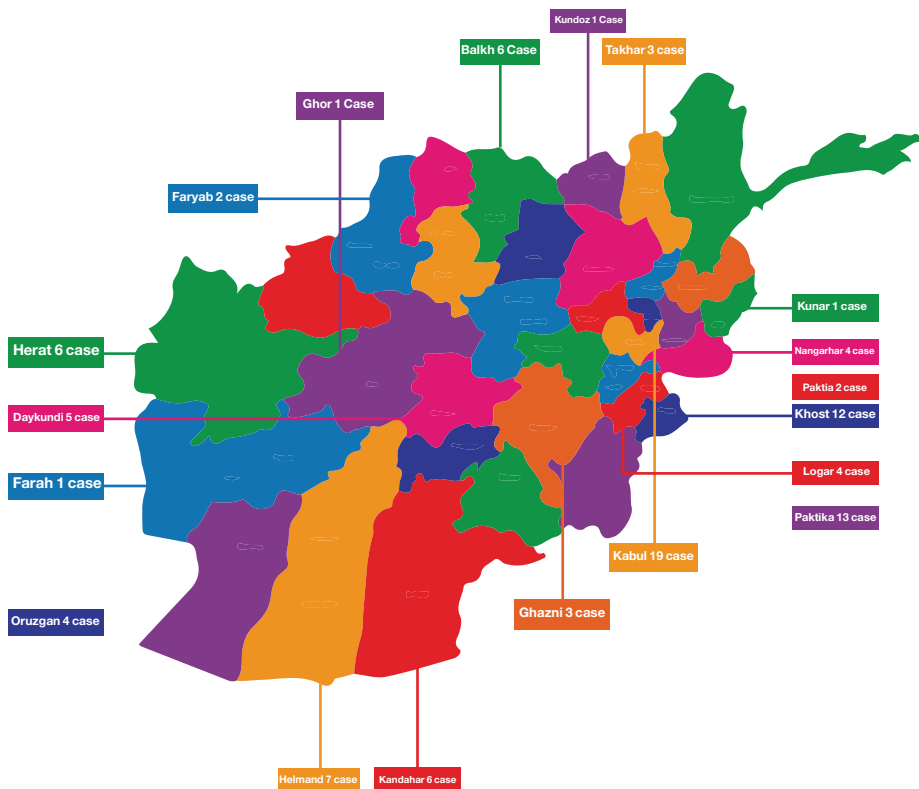
Statistics of Violence by Gender



« Cases based in zones »



« Cases based in Provinces »



Few examples of the cases of Violence, Threat And Misbehavior against Journalists in 2019

- In November, a Helmand-based reporter, while riding the National Army convoy to cover their operation, got injured when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb.
- In July, a local reporter in Paktika, published a report on the serial killings of the Taliban. Soon after, he was threatened by the Taliban and had to leave Paktika because of fear of retribution.
- In July, a local radio station in Ghazni Province was threatened by the Taliban for having female presenters, which prompted the station lay off their female employees.
- In July, National Directorate of Security (NDS) personnel arrested a local reporter in Paktika province during a live show, for posting a criticizing Facebook article about the governor. He was illegally detained for three hours.
- In August, anchor of private TV channel in Kabul, presented the station with notice for her resignation. Because the station did not want her to leave her job, her manager refused to offer her a clearance letter, which technically stops her from working for any other media outlet.
- In March, a local reporter, while covering a conflict between Atta Mohammad Noor armed forces and national security forces, was physically assaulted and Atta Mohammad Noor's gunmen seized his camera.

It is worth noting that AJSC has informally documented four cases of killing, three cases of the injured, two cases of physically beaten and also two cases of intimidation against journalists. However, these cases do not contribute towards the victims journalistic work and are therefore excluded from this report.

AJSC believes that the following reasons have been key to the decline of the cases of violence and threats against journalists and media workers

1. Peace talks with the Taliban: In 2109, Taliban have made great strides to present themselves as more of a political group, rather than an insurgent entity. This was most likely the reason for their refraining from directly targeting journalists and media outlets because that could undermine their image.
2. Setback of Daesh in Afghanistan: In 2019, Daesh suffered major setback in their military and terrorist operations and lost most of the territories it had once captured. As Daesh was one of the main perpetrators of violence, particularly being responsible for killing of journalists, their degradation has mitigated their military and operational capabilities. AJSC believes this is responsible for their failure to attack journalists and media workers.

3. Success of advocacy initiatives for journalists' safety: AJSC has undertaken many initiatives to improve the safety and security of journalists and media outlets. AJSC has persistently worked with government stakeholders, media outlets and journalists to enhance safety and security precautions.

Conducting safety training workshops, developing safety policies and guidelines and distributing safety gear, such as armored vests and helmets, to journalists and media outlets, were among the safety measures provided to journalists and media outlets by AJSC. In 2018 and 2019, AJSC distributed more than 300 armored vests and helmets to media outlets across the country, which was widely welcomed by journalists and media outlets. Additionally, AJSC conducted many safety and first aid training workshops for journalists across the country, which equipped them with life-saving tools and skills while covering hostile situations. Moreover, AJSC has attempted to directly engage media owners and managers, developed safety guidelines, shared them with media outlets across the country and has been working with media outlets to implement the guidelines. AJSC maintains hotline services in 34 provinces of the country, through which it helps journalists who face safety threats. In rather critical situations, such as fall of a province or when a journalist is no longer deemed safe in Afghanistan, AJSC uses its "Journalist Relocation Program", which relocates journalists to safer places, including outside the country.

4. Reduction of international reporters: Since the reduction of foreign forces in Afghanistan in 2014, less international journalists travel to Afghanistan for reporting purposes. This has decreased the exposure of international journalists to violence. As per the reports published by Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF), the number of international reporters has dropped to half since 2014. This decline can also contribute to the decrease in the cases of violence against journalists and media outlets, particularly in the year 2019, as a smaller number of international journalists traveled to Afghanistan compared to the previous years.

The status of Freedom of Speech, Media Outlets and Journalists during the National Unity Government (NUG)

Prior to establishment of NUG and after the first round of Presidential Elections in 2014, AJSC, with support of Journalists Federation, drafted a "Commitment Letter" aimed at safeguarding journalists and supporting freedoms of press and speech, which included 13 articles. The two candidates of the second round of the 2014 Presidential Elections, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, signed the commitment letter.

The following were included in this commitment letter

- Respecting the freedom of speech and press freedom as non-violable principles and pledging to spare no legal measures to promote and protect press freedom and freedom of speech, as stated in the laws of Afghanistan.
- Rendering freedom of speech as the right of the people of Afghanistan and remaining committed to ensuring this right for the people of Afghanistan as enshrined in the constitution and the national laws.
- Supporting the rights of media and journalists and effectively dismissing those cases that are filed against journalists in contrary to the laws.

- Instructing the judicial bodies to re-examine and investigate cases of murdered and injured journalists.
- Committing to taking decisive measures to enforcing the Access to Information Act.
- Pledging to incorporate a subject into the curriculum of security forces so that they are educated how to best behave with journalists.
- Pledging to develop specific and practical measures to ensure the safety and security of journalists and media workers, and making every effort to prevent violence against journalists and media workers.
- Ensuring that the Ministry of Information and Culture will carry out its legal responsibilities with respect to the media and journalists in an appropriate and lawful way and, as the regulating body for media outlets, the Ministry supports media outlets and each and every journalist in an equal and efficient manner.
- Committing to taking practical and meaningful action to incorporating specific provisions in the national laws and especially in the Criminal Code on punishing those who exercise violence or intimidation against journalists during or because of their journalistic work.
- Pledging to prepare a new law within the framework or in compliance with the country's Labor Law on the job security of journalists and striving toward its approval.
- Pledging to create a national trust fund in support of journalists, and the President personally strives to raise funds for the trust fund.

As soon as the NUG was formed, the first pledge fulfilled by the President was endorsement of the Law on Access to Information. Besides, in very early days of NUG, the first Vice President offered financial assistance to the National Trust Fund in support of journalists. Moreover, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of NUG met with journalists and representatives from media support organizations and promised to follow the cases of the killing and injury of journalists and media workers.

As a result of continuous requests and advocacy efforts of media support organizations, the NUG fulfilled some of the articles of this commitment letter, such as endorsement of the Law on Access to Information, re-investigation of the cases of murder and injury of journalists, modification of the Regulation on the Establishment and Activity of Mass Media and ordering governmental entities and officials to facilitate and assist journalists with access to information.

On the other hand, issuance of a decree on safeguarding journalists, investigation of the cases of murder and other forms of violence against journalists, tasking NUG Spokespersons to convene weekly news conferences in Government Media and Information Center (GMIC), establishing the Oversight Commission on Access to Information, requesting the UN to introduce a special representative to follow up and address safety challenges of Afghan journalist, developing the procedure on safety of journalists, tasking security entities to develop clear directives on behavior of security forces with journalist and meetings of the President with media owners, journalists and representatives of media and journalists support organizations are among other activities which, to an extent, fulfills the articles of this commitment letter.

Through establishing the Joint Committee for the Safety and Security of Journalists (JCSSJ), which brings together government officials and media representatives to discuss and address safety challenges of journalists, the government opened a direct channel between government, journalists and media support organizations and unions, which proved to be very constructive, especially after 2015, when terrorist groups changed their strategies toward media community and began directly targeting journalists and media outlets. In provinces, the JCSSJ chaired by the deputy governors have also proved to be very helpful. Besides this, the exemption of tax fines by the President for those outlets, which had not paid their taxes, and payment of the due taxes over the course of seven years, made tremendous contribution in supporting media outlets with their financial challenges.

Despite the above activities, lack of a comprehensive and integrated roadmap to support freedom of speech, media and journalist safety retarded the needed efforts to bolster safe working environment for journalists and address some crucial challenges such as access to information and the lingering impunity of crimes against journalists.

Killing of over 50 journalists and media workers during the last five years and hundreds of cases of violence against journalists indicates a sharp increase in the graph of violence against journalists and media outlets.

As an example, in 2015 and 2016, when Kunduz Province fell to the Taliban, the only organization that could help Kunduz-based journalists with their evacuation and accommodation in Kabul, Balkh, Baghlan and other provinces was AJSC. Similarly, when the Taliban captured parts of the centers of Farah, Helmand and Ghazni Provinces, the only organization with practical programs was AJSC, who, with assistance from National Directorate of Security and Ministry of Defense, managed to evacuate journalists to the neighboring provinces and facilitate their accommodation in the military bases in Farah, which was the only safe zone in the province.

Access to Information

President Ashraf Ghani endorsed the Law on Access to Information a few days after he assumed office in 2014. The law was then modified and enacted in 2019, which is viewed to be the best law in the region and beyond.

Similarly, in February 2016, the President issued a decree which aimed at implementation of the laws and regulations on freedom of speech and access to information. This decree mandated the Ministry of Information and Culture, Ministry of Justice and the Civil Service Commission classify information, which could then be shared with media and the public based on a clear mechanism. The decree further added that ministries and other governmental entities are duty bound to share the required information to journalists and media outlets.

The decree also tasked defense and security organizations to include rights of journalists and media outlets and professional behavior of security forces with journalists in their teaching curricula.

Addressing media violations and the legal cases of media workers, and investigating the cases of killing of journalists and media workers were also included in this decree. However, this decree was not fully implemented with respect to access to information and investigating the cases of killing of journalists and media workers. Still, there are many unaddressed cases of journalists who were killed because of their professional work, which is quite worrisome for media community.

Despite continuous advocacy efforts, a solid mechanism for classification of information has not been created yet. Information is not efficiently provided to journalists and in many cases, government workers do not even cooperate with regards to provision of information. This includes even the highest-ranking officials of the government. For instance, during a press conference following an official trip to Malaysia, Australia and Singapore, President Ghani refrained from answering questions asked by a local journalist in Kabul. The President angrily said that he would only answer to questions relating to his recent trip to the countries. But at the same press conference, he answered to Al Jazeera Reporter's question which was not related to his trip. This created uproar among local journalists because they saw this as preferential treatment of media outlets.

Similarly, during an official trip to Balkh to monitor the security situation, addressing defense and security forces in 209 Shaheen Military Corps, President Ghani thanked the troops and advised them to not take the judgment of media seriously. "Put what TV channels say aside; they are pouring out gas, but you are throwing bomb", he added. The media community strongly condemned these quote of the President and asked him to apologize from the media community.

However, despite the negative events pertaining to press freedom, there have been some positive happenings. For instance, access of media support organizations to the President, appointment of the ambassador to freedom of speech, encouraging journalists to prepare investigative reports, etc. are among the solid initiatives that demonstrate the support of NUG to promoting press freedom and freedom of speech.

Lack of Cooperation And Duty Dereliction of Governmental Officials With Respect to Sharing Information

One of the main complaints of the media community from the government offices under NUG has been lack of provision of timely and accurate information to journalists. This was properly manifested in three major attacks in Afghanistan – attack on Sardar Dawood Hospital, attack on Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul and attack on 209 Shaheen Corps in Balkh. After the terrorist attack on Sardar Dawood Hospital by ISIS affiliated militants in March 2017, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Defense announced that during this attack, 30 people were killed and 40 more were injured. Whereas, the eyewitnesses told reporters that the number of fatal casualties was over 100. Later on, the government also accepted that in that incident, more than 100 people were killed and more than 460 injured.

In early 2018, militants attacked the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul. Ministry of Interior announced that only 7 individuals were injured, but eyewitnesses told reporters that 22 people, including 14 foreign citizens, were killed in that incident.

In another occasion, on the day of attack on 209 Shaheen Military Corps, the number of casualties was reported as 8 by the Ministry of Defense, but reliable sources and eyewitnesses reported the number of casualties as more than 100. Taliban, through a press release on the day of the incident, claimed that they had killed more than 100 security forces personnel.

In other cases of attacks in the provinces, the number of casualties reported by the security forces compared to that reported by eyewitnesses and journalists shows a high contradiction.

Provision of inaccurate figures by the government pertaining to the casualties has resulted in journalists losing trust in the data provided by the government; therefore, they often refer to unofficial sources for obtaining data related to casualties.

Access of journalists to information has been a major challenge in the provinces as well. In many provinces, only Governor's Office and Office of Security Officials have had spokespersons that could be presumed as offices where journalists would refer to seek information. Yet, the efficacy and efficiency of these offices in terms of providing accurate and timely information has been a major challenge by itself.

AJSC has received numerous complaints about the attempts of the offices of governors and security forces based in the provinces to manipulate reporters' stories by offering inaccurate information or facts that promote their image and performance. This has not only failed to help them achieve their objectives but has also hurt their credibility. Other than a few entities named above, many other provincial entities do not even understand what access to information means, and in some cases, when journalists refer to access to information law to obtain information, the very concept of access to information law seems alien to them because of their lack of awareness of the law.

In sum, provision of timely and accurate information to journalists has not been institutionalized in Afghanistan's governance culture yet, and mostly, government officials deem providing information a favor, rather than fulfilling their legal obligation.

Journalists as soft but important targets for terrorist groups

Failure of the government, media outlets and journalists to take up fundamental action with regards to enhancing safety, and the changes in the nature of terrorist attacks where journalists and media are directly targeted have made journalists and media workers more prone to fatalities.

As the overall security situation deteriorated in the country during the National Unity Government, journalists incurred many casualties. Expansion of the operation of Daesh in the past couple of years increased the casualty rate of journalists, turning Afghanistan into the most dangerous country for journalists in 2017 and 2018.

The two attacks, which resulted in the killing of 11 journalists, were landmark incidents in the fatality trend of journalists. The attack on a group of journalists in Shahsdarak Kabul in April 2018, which led to the killing of 9 journalists, created immense panic among journalists. It was also seen as the turning point in the relationship between journalists and terrorist groups. In the second attack, where two journalists were killed while covering an explosion in Western Kabul, media outlets were profoundly criticized for not adopting necessary measures for the protection of their staff. This was because these journalists appeared in the explosion scene without any safety gear and security protocol as to how terrorist incidents should be safely covered.

Requests and expectations of journalists and media community from the government that will be formed after the 2019 Presidential Election

Media community would like to request the new government to address their following requests

1. Comprehensive implementation of laws, regulations, rules, etc. relevant to freedom of speech, journalist safety and press freedom.
2. Providing sufficient support for Access to Information Commission so that the commission can effectively address the pervasive challenges that exist in the government structure with regards to provision of information to journalists.
3. Investigation and effective follow up of the cases of the killing and injury of journalists by judicial bodies and prosecution of the perpetrators.
4. Adopting concrete measures towards preventing violence against journalists and media workers and creation of a meaningful roadmap for ending impunity of crimes against journalists.
5. Empowerment of the Ministry of Information and Culture, as the main regulating and supporting body for the media, so it can effectively implement its duties related to press freedom and freedom of expression.
6. Inclusion of specific articles in the penal code and criminal procedure code on prosecution of perpetrators of violence against journalists so the perpetrators are prosecuted in a speedy manner.
7. Adopting a new regulation, in light of labor law of the country, to improve job security of journalists and media workers.

Conclusion

2019, as compared to previous years, was a relatively safer year for Afghan journalists and media community because of the reduction in the killing of journalists. But as a whole, 105 incidents of violence and threats amounts to a significant degree of violence.

In 2019, financial challenges of media have grown rapidly, intensifying the risk that Afghanistan lose a large number of media outlets. Access to information still remains a significant challenge for journalists. Taliban's direct attacks on media and journalists have decreased, which can be attributed to peace talks. Similarly, Daesh, being militarily undermined in Afghanistan, has not be able to target media and journalists, same as they had done before. During the peace talks with the Taliban, preserving and protecting achievements of media during the past 18 years has not been one of the major topics of discussion, creating tremendous concern among the media community.

Recommendations

- The Afghan government and international community must take concrete stand with respect to preservation of freedom of speech and press freedom during peace talks with Taliban. Freedom of speech and press freedom, as the major achievements of the post-Taliban era, have played a major role in the improvement of good governance, promotion of human rights and enhancing public awareness. Undermining this achievement would lead to regression on all aforementioned pillars of a democratic government.
- The newly elected government, in consultation with journalists and media community, must come up with concrete solution to address the gaps in ensuring and promoting freedom of speech and safety and security of journalists and media outlets. AJSC stands ready to assist the government in this regard.
- Establishment of the Joint Committee for the Safety and Security of Journalists (JCSSJ) is counted as one of the major achievements of the NUG in terms of addressing the challenges of journalists and media outlets. However, based on AJSC's monitoring of JCSSJ activities, particularly in the provinces, the Committee's decisions are not thoroughly implemented, which reduces its efficacy and impact. The Committee must come up with a meaningful and effective roadmap for implementing the decisions of the Committee, including a plan for monitoring and evaluation of its activities.
- To assist media outlets with the financial challenges, the government should develop a procedure to equally distribute its advertisements to private media outlets across the country. This can be an effective way to help media outlets without exerting influence over their content production.
- Media owners and managers must take the safety of their employees seriously and must upgrade protection of their media premises. Security institutions have declared their readiness to assist the media outlets with security recommendations. AJSC is also prepared to provide consultations to the media outlets in this regard.
- International community must include support to freedom of speech and press freedom in their strategic priorities. Afghanistan's international partners have played a key role in promotion of press freedom and proliferation of media outlets across Afghanistan. Their support is still needed so that these gains become solidified in Afghanistan.
- Journalists must give priority to their safety and security because no news is more important than their own life. AJSC encourages that they attend the safety training workshops conducted by AJSC or other organizations.