



# Afghan Journalists Safety Committee

## Six-Month Report

July – December, 2013

Published on: 03/02/2014

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## Summary

- Violence against journalists has decreased compared to the first six months of the year 2013 by 15%. AJSC has recorded 35 incidents of violence and threats during the second half of 2013 (July—December) in which involvement of government officials accounts for 63% while during the first half of the year government officials accounted only for 42% of the incidents showing an increase up by 21%. The Taliban accounts for 17% of incidences and warlords and unidentified individuals and groups are responsible for 12%. Security forces are responsible for the bulk of the cases.
- Lack of commitment of the government to support media workers safety and freedom of expression, increased intimidation of journalists by government officials, lack of Access to Information Law, lack of legal basis for the safety of journalists, low level of knowledge about the rights of journalists, lack of meaningful regulatory mechanism, inadequate knowledge of media workers about ethics and principles of journalism, and the growing reluctance of the international community in supporting media and freedom of expression are important factors of violence and intimidation against journalists.
- Female media workers remain more vulnerable toward intimidation mainly because cultural constraints against the presence of women in the media sector.
- Violence against journalists is likely to increase in the run up to the elections because of the increasing attempts of the Afghan government to control the information space, increased subversive activities of the Taliban, increased activities of the warlords in electoral campaigns and low level of the knowledge of reporters about election coverage.
- Inadequate knowledge of election reporting and conflict-sensitive journalism among Afghan media workers, the population's divide over ethnic and language lines, partisan media outlets, lack of oversight mechanism on the performance of media outlets and corruption among some journalists increase the country's vulnerability vis-à-vis election coverage by the media.
- Professional coverage of elections by media plays an important role in the smooth transfer of power during elections. Unprofessional coverage on the other hand can prove devastating in the context of divided nations and fragile estates.
- Afghan media's coverage of elections has improved compared to their performance in the previous elections because they have gained more experience and knowledge in covering elections.
- Social Media has begun to play an important role serving as a platform for citizen journalism and electoral campaigning both by candidates and their supporters. Propagation of hate speech on the social media, although on low scale, remains a concern.
- The status quo creates serious threat towards preservation of media and freedom of expression as Afghanistan's biggest achievement of the past decade. Additionally, Afghanistan's media will remain vulnerable without proper and meaningful support by the Afghan government, strategic outlook by the media outlets toward the future of their business and the strategic and coordinated support of the international community.
- A conflict-sensitive regulatory environment and an independent oversight mechanism and rigorous training programs are needed for the improvement of the practice the media in the country.
- Afghan government needs a paradigm shift: instead of seeing media as a threat, they should consider the industry as a strategic asset for the development of the country, solidification of democracy and marginalization of the propaganda of the Taliban. Ministry of Information and

Culture should identify common working grounds with the media and begin to work with the media so that the current pitfalls are addressed and Afghan media becomes more professional.

- In 2013, a total of 37 media outlets, of which 32 were print media and 5 radio stations, have become nonoperational across Afghanistan

## Preamble

The year 2013 is perceived as one of the challenging years for Afghanistan's media. During this year the challenges facing the media have overshadowed the achievements of this sector. Escalation of violence against journalists, increased sense of indifference towards the perpetrators of violence against media workers and the culture of impunity, Afghan government's efforts to pose further limitations to media and journalists' work, the parliament's hostile stand against freedom of expression and press freedom, the ambiguity surrounding the future of Access to Information Act and Journalists' Code of Conduct, and the exacerbation of the financial challenges of media organizations are among the issues contributing to the increased limitations against media and overall journalism as a profession.

More importantly, in all major discourses during this year, there have been minimal and almost no discussions about the future of media and freedom of expression as one of the biggest achievements of the country in the past ten years. The challenges and threats facing the future of this profession are increasingly being ignored and the candidates of presidential elections in their agendas have given no priority to the future of this profession so far. In the absence of keen attention, the future of media and freedom of expression will be in jeopardy and the profession may suffer big damages should the current disinterest continue.

At the same time, for the first time in the past ten years a provocative remark by one of the participants of a roundtable discussion about ethnic matters elicited a national level uproar deepening ethnic differences in an unprecedented scale. Although the Afghan government's measures subsided the uproar, the incident should be seen as an alarm and utmost attention should be paid to the fact that media can lead Afghanistan to the verge of uncontrollable crisis if they ignore professionalism.

On the other hand, the presidential elections in April 2014 and the parliamentary elections in 2015 present yet another test to media. Since press coverage of elections constitutes one of the most crucial and sensitive aspects of journalism, journalists and media managers should make sure that their work remains professional and inadvertent errors are avoided.

This is Afghan Journalists Safety Committee's second six-month report that depicts the situation of media and safety of journalists in the second half of 2013. It also provides statistics and brief description on the cases of violence against journalists. Owing to the paramount importance of the election coverage by the media, a significant portion of this report has been dedicated to highlighting the media coverage of the previous elections in Afghanistan and the weaknesses of Afghan media in covering elections. Meanwhile, given the increasing importance of social media in Afghanistan, the report also briefly covers the growth of social media and their role in elections.

It is worth mentioning that AJSC records and presents the cases of violence against journalists in accordance with its policies and procedures which means that AJSC has a specific definition for 'journalist' and 'media worker'; thus, cases where the legal status of the victim does not conform to AJSC's definition, have not been recorded.

## A Quick Outlook to the Overall Status of Media and Journalism

Media sector saw a booming growth over the past ten years in Afghanistan. Based on the statistics provided by Ministry of Information and Culture, today more than 75 TV stations, more than 200 radio stations and hundreds of print publications and websites are operating in the country. This comes at a time that during the Taliban regime there were only two print publications and one radio station, all government owned, which were entirely dedicated to propagating the government's agenda and programs and demonstrated zero compliance with journalistic values or standards.

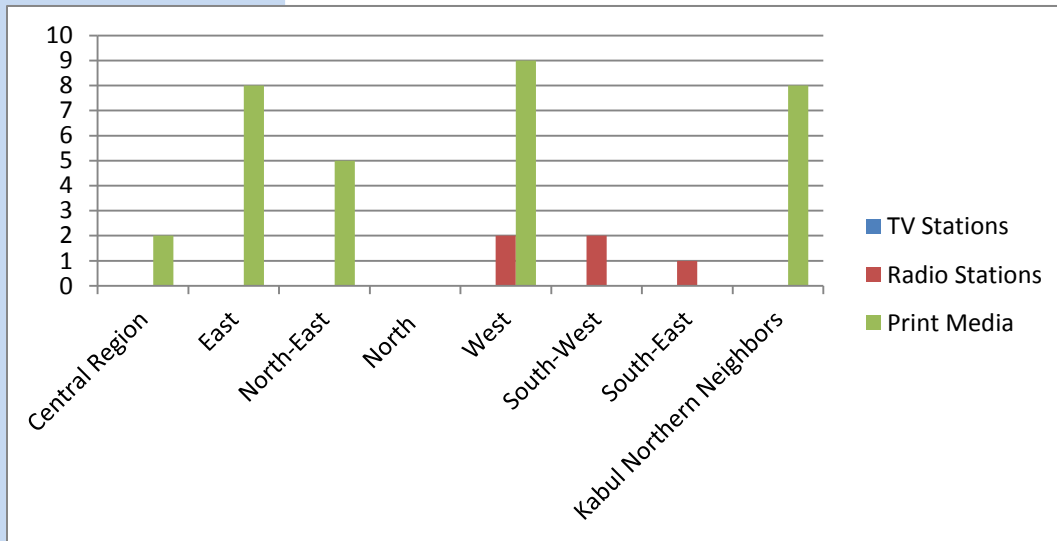
But this quantitative growth of Afghan media over the last decade was not counterbalanced by similar qualitative growth due to the nascence of the profession and lack of adequate number of professionals. Additionally, no strategic decisions have so far been made in the country aimed at qualitative improvement of this profession and the attempts for reforms, both by Afghans and international donors have lacked the necessary strategic commitment and have been sporadic, disorganized and uncoordinated for the most part. The curriculum in journalism schools of the country remains outdated and minimal steps are taken to update the same. Meanwhile, many efforts for establishing a principled regulatory framework for the profession have failed. There is no national Code of Ethics and many media organizations operate in absence of their own code of conduct. Furthermore, many outlets lack editorial policies and professional guidelines that are consistent with the highest standards of the profession and are understandable for the journalists working in that media. Very little efforts have been made to develop content creation from its old fashioned traditional style to high standard creative ways which strives towards excellence and many media remain complacent with their current reporting standards.

Furthermore, a remarkable number of media, ignoring ethics and principles of the profession, are furthering the agenda and objectives of certain political parties, ethnic groups and even the policies of some of the regional countries. It should also be added that the majority of such dependent media have way less viewership compared with the independent and professional media. Independent media organizations, however, strive to improve the quality of their programming and introduce variety and creativity to their products.

The transformation decade (2014—2024) will also see a drop in the resources available to media due to the overall international aid reduction. Owing to a lack of long term economic plan in many media outlets, this reduction will prove handicapping for them. Even today many independent media are struggling with economic challenges.

In 2013, a total of 37 media outlets, of which 32 were print media and 5 radio stations, have become nonoperational across Afghanistan.

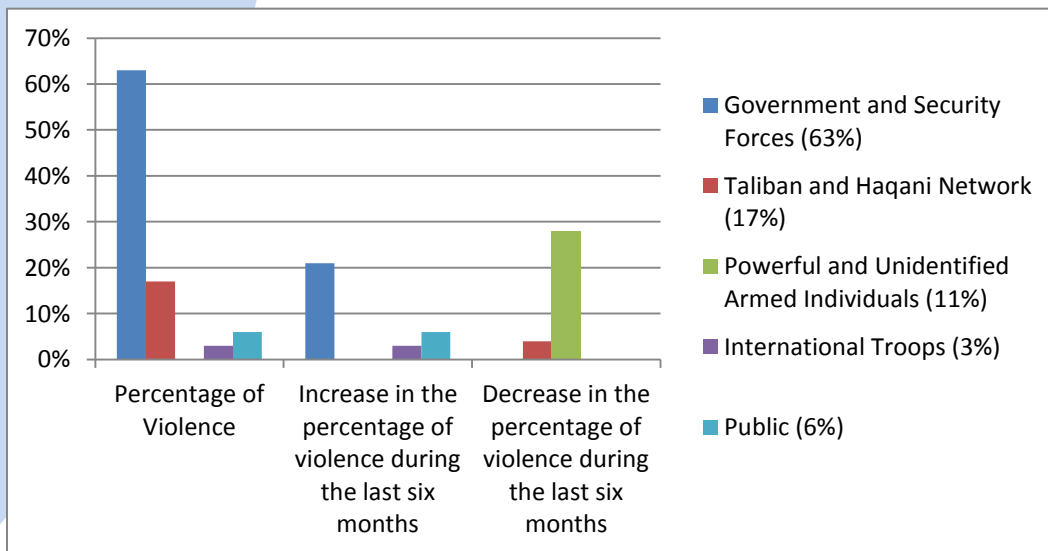
A. The following chart summarizes the number of the reduction of media outlets (TV, Radio, and Print) in 2013



### Journalists' Safety over the Last Six Months of 2013

Fortunately, the incidents of violence against journalists in the second six months of 2013 were lower compared to the first six months of the same year. However, the number of government officials who have committed violence against journalists is much higher than the corresponding numbers in the first six months. AJSC has recorded 35 incidents of violence and threats during the second half of 2013 in which involvement of government officials account for 63% while during the first half of the year government officials account only for 42% of the incidents of violence and threats showing an increase up by 21%. The Taliban account for 17% and warlords and unidentified individuals and groups are responsible for 12% of the entire incidents of violence.

B. The following chart summarizes the percentage of perpetrators of violence in the second six months of 2013



Among government workers, security forces account for a significant portion of incidents of violence against journalists. In most of the times, violence occurs during suicide attacks or subsequent to an argument between journalists and the security forces. Additionally, according to this report and the previous reports and data of AJSC's, the scale of violence against journalists is higher in the remote areas compared to the central areas.

The experience of the last ten years shows that insecurity poses many challenges to the work and safety of journalists. Although the security situation has not been any worse in 2013 than the previous years, the increased psychological stress regarding the future of the country and government's indifference towards the rights and safety of journalists have caused constraints in the work of journalists. Furthermore, increased limitations on providing information by government officials, inability of journalists to travel outside the provincial centers for their reports and the increase in threats by the Taliban and local warlords have all added to the constraints of journalists' work.

Lack of commitment of the government to support media sector and freedom of expression, increased intimidation of journalists by government officials and the growing reluctance of the international community in supporting media and freedom of expression have weakened the position of the media community in defending their professional work, undermined the constructive role of journalism and has further emboldened those who see freedom of expression as a threat to their interests to intimidate journalists without any fear of prosecution. On the other hand, as the Taliban and the government security forces increase their focus on propaganda war, journalists find themselves increasingly under closer surveillance and threat of militants.

The Afghan parliament also has adopted a hostile approach against media and freedom of expression as they proved it by approving amendments to three articles of the Media Law in August this year. This opposition was so explicit that one of the MPs, Abdul Satar Khawasi, declared Jihad against media in a plenary where the Minister of Information and Culture, Sayed Makhdoom Raheen, proposing amendments to three articles of the Media Law. The statements of the mentioned MP and the silence of the majority of MPs against those statements was an alarm to the future of media.

Low professional capacity of journalists has remained as a pressing challenge facilitating violence against journalists in a considerable number of cases. Media outlets remain less interested in capacity building of their staff due to lack of a strategic vision; hence, they have made minimal efforts in this front. Also, lack of code of ethics and code of conduct and biased enforcement of the Media Law has resulted in lack of a principled regulatory framework for exercising journalism and lack of a clear definition of the proper and improper practices. The Media Violations Commission of the Ministry of Information and Culture, which is an illegal commission in the first place, uses its discretion – usually political discretion – while handling the cases referred to it and lacks the standards required to distinguish between professional and none professional work. Even some of those who decide cases within this commission have no knowledge of professional journalism.

Ministry of Information and Culture, in its capacity as the regulator of the activities of the media, has shown no initiative to regulate the activities of media and practice of the profession. Pressure and intimidation has been the only tool the mentioned ministry has used so far against journalists and media. This lack of direction in the Ministry of Information and Culture has not only reduced the ministry to an ineffective body but also its dictatorial measures have deepened the gap between media and government perpetuating a vicious cycle of acts of sabotage against each other.

Meanwhile, in many instances, especially outside Kabul, the government officials directly refer journalists to legal bodies without observing the Media Law and the legal bodies prosecute journalists or put them under pressure due to either unawareness or ignoring the Media Law. It is worth mentioning that this practice is the most significant example of government officials exerting pressure on journalists or threatening them to suffocate their voice. According to the law, all media violations should be handled by Mass Media Commission of the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Also, it should not be left unsaid that in some cases violence against journalists is caused by unprofessional behavior of journalists. Some journalists think that they are above all laws and principles and can behave in whatever way they want.

On the other hand, in the areas influenced by the Taliban, the Taliban controls the work of journalists and the broadcast content of local media outlets and journalists are threatened if their reporting does not line up with the Taliban's interests and demands. For instance, if a journalist reports a suicide attack mentioning civilian casualties, or if there is news from government side citing casualties of the armed opposition forces, or if dead body of a person is found who has been killed in a mysterious way and government officials attribute it to the armed opposition groups, broadcasting any of such news stories can bring journalists under intimidation of the Taliban.

Drug smugglers and local warlords are also a big source of intimidation and violence against journalists, particularly in the countryside. In many parts of the country journalists cannot report on the arbitrary actions of these individuals and groups because of the fear for their life so reporters have to resort to self-censorship. The sporadic news stories which are broadcast rarely about the oppressions of local powerful individuals and unidentified armed men most of whom are engaged in illicit businesses are findings of journalists operating from Kabul who enjoy relatively better safety.

Among all, what is most annoying and concerning to journalists is the harsh behavior and violence of government workers. Growing reluctance of the government to provide information and their systematic efforts to influence media and journalists coupled with pressuring media in various forms are among the factors that have undermined the constructive role of journalism. The government's preferential treatment in terms of providing first-hand information to government-friendly outlets that is geared towards prompting more outlets into following the government's agendas and policies has further divided media outlets.

Female media workers are even more insecure and find their workspace more restricted day by day. Female staff of the media does not often feel safe outside their offices thus their work has remained restricted to indoor activities for the most part. Many female journalists or TV presenters face threats from extremists and even sometimes from their family members because many consider women’s work in the media inappropriate task for women. Double standard behavior with female journalists in the media outlets and the illegitimate expectations from them in their offices are also among the challenges that make female media workers face. This is the primary reason behind many female media workers who quit their jobs.

**Table 3: of Violence against Journalists, July—December 2013**

No.	Name	Media	Type of Violence	Culprit	Province	Date	Description
1	Fahim Fetrat	1 TV station	Beating	Traffic police	Kabul	01/07/2013	They were filming the policemen beating roadside vendors. When police noticed this, they beat up both of them. The reason for beating the journalists was capturing video of police’s assault on the vendors.
2	Naseer Sekandar	1 TV station	Beating	Traffic Police	Kabul	1/07/2013	They were filming the policemen beating roadside vendors. When police noticed this, they hit both of them. The reason for beating the journalists was recording government’s violations.
3	Farhad Safi	Zhwandoo n TV	Beating	Police	Kabul	8/12/2013	Police stops and searches the car on Jalalabad road. Upon noticing Farhad’s laptop they begin questioning Farhad and ask him. Farhad displays his journalist badge. Later, police becomes angrier and shoots at him when he drives away. Upon arriving in Kabul, Farhad filed official complaint and also put media and concerned authorities in picture. Subsequently he is

							threatened to death by phone because of his filing complaint.
4	Hameed Sediqi	Noor TV	Beating	Security Forces	Kabul	9/18/2013	He was out in the site for coverage of a suicide attack and the police accused him of filming the facility and beat him up.
5	Masoud	Almas TV	Beating	Demonstrators	Mazar-e-Sharif	6/8/2013	During distribution of food by Ghazanfar Company to needy people, a clash erupted among people. At that time Masoud was recording the scene for his report. Since people were already angry, they beat Masoud saying we are in trouble and you are videotaping us.
6	Munir	Mehr TV	Beating	Demonstrators	Mazar-e-Sharif	6/8/2013	During distribution of food by Ghazanfar Company to people, a clash erupted among people. At that time Masoud was recording the scene for his report. Since people were already angry, they beat Masoud saying we are in trouble and you are videotaping us.
7	Shapoor Saber	Radio Azadi	Beating	Election Commission and Security Forces	Heraat	9/15/2013	He was beaten up while he was trying to enter the election commission compound in Heraat. He did not have his ID and his quarrel with the security guard led to this.

8	Khalil Noorzai	AlJazeera	Beating	Election Commission and Security Forces	Heraat	9/15/2013	He was beaten up while he was trying to enter the election commission compound in Heraat. He did not have his ID and his quarrel with the security guard led to this.
9	Hassan Hakimi	Pajhwok Afghan News	Threatened to quit job	Taliban	Ghor	23/7/2013	He is an activist and a member of the civil society. The Taliban threatened him to quit his job or they would kill him. This is because he was not complying with their demands in terms of reporting.
10	Hameed Sherzai	Tanwir TV	Threatened to death	Ex-mayor of Poli Khomri	Baghlan	27/7/2013	There were rumors around the Mayor's dismissal and Hameed Sherzai had written a report on this matter. Therefore the Mayor threatened him for careless and imbalanced reporting.
11	Hamed Rasooli	Tanwir TV	Beating	Ex-mayor of Poli Khomri	Baghlan	27/7/2013	There were rumors around the Mayor's dismissal and Hameed Sherzai had written a report on this matter. Therefore the Mayor threatened him for careless and imbalanced reporting.
12	Sher Mohammad Jahish	Tanwir TV	Apprehension	Security Chief	Baghlan	30/7/2013	There were rumors around the Mayor's dismissal and Hameed Sherzai had written a report on this matter. Therefore the Mayor threatened him for careless and imbalanced reporting.
13	Aref Danishjo	Radio Hamsada	Beating	Police	Takhar	13/8/2013	Police did not allow him to report from a voters registration center. This led to a quarrel and police beat him up.

14	Nader Azizi	Radio Takharistan	Argument	Police	Takhar	30/7/2013	Police did not allow him to report from a voters registration center. This led to a quarrel and police beat him up.
15	Nasratullah Iqbal	Bokhdi News Agency	Beaten and Injured	Parwan Governor or Basir Salangi	Parwan	25/7/2013	He had critiqued and disputed some of the matters in Basir Salangi, governor of Parwan provinces' book on Facebook.
16	Mohammad Naeem Rahimi	Ariana TV	Beating	Police	Kunduz	3/10/2013	While making shooting on the street for a report, police beat him up on the way without asking for his journalist ID.
17	Fekrman	Bakhtar News Agency	Beating	National Security	Wardak	1/09/2013	He was beaten up by police while he was filming a suicide attack scene for reporting purpose.
18	Sayed Shah Saeem	Radio Azadi	Threaten to death	Taliban	Wardak	15/11/2013	He has resisted against the Taliban's demand to favor them in his stories; as a result he has been threatened several times.
19	Hekmat Aryan	Radio Killid	Threatened to quit the job	Taliban	Ghazni	1/7/2013	Taliban accused him of being biased in his reporting because he was not being compliant with the demands of the Taliban.
20	Saifullah Maftoon	Pajhwok Afghan News	Violence	police	Ghazni	11/12/2013	Improper behavior during searching journalistic equipment and violence by police
21	Mohammad Aref Noorzai	Radio Killid	Threatened to death	Taliban	Ghazni	1/12/2013	He is presenter of a music show. Taliban call the show and say music is not allowed in Islam. Later on, Taliban called his personal number and told him to wait his death.

22	Nezamudin	Ghaznawyan TV	Beating	Public order police	Ghazni	11/9/2013	He was beaten up by public protection police while he was Preparing a report on a road side bomb that targeted public protection police.
23	Mohammad Hassan Rahimi	Bost Bastan	Beating	National security	Ghazni	11/9/2013	He was arrested by ISAF for suspicion of supporting the Taliban. He was then sent to NDS for investigation where he got beat up.
24	Raaz Mohammad Talash	Bakhtar News Agency	Beating	National security	Ghazni	22/12/2013	Talash was preparing a report on the victims of a suicide attack, the police prevented and beat him
25	Mohammad Aliyas Daiee	Radio Azadi	Threatened to quit the job	Armed Taliban	Helmand	9/12/2013	He was threatened to quit his job because he had reported about the successful National Army military operation on the areas controlled by the Taliban.
26	Khalid Nekzad	Radio Elham	Beating	Unidentified armed persons	Parwan	1/11/2013	He was on his way to Sayed Khel district to develop a story on the Martyrs Week and he was beaten by armed individuals who then fled.
27	Waseel Nekzad	Radio Elham	Beating	Unidentified armed persons	Parwan	1/11/2013	He was on his way to Sayed Khel district to develop a story on the Martyrs Week and he was beaten by armed individuals who then fled.
28	Farhad Behroz	RTA	Threatened to death	Abdul Ali, Counter Narcotics Director	Kapisa	19/8/2013	He was threatened to death because he had not included the Director's voice in the report.

29	Mujtaba Nabizada	RTA	Threatened to death	Abdul Ali, Counter Narcotics Director	Kapisa	19/8/2013	He was threatened to death because he had not included the Director's voice in the report
30	Nasir Ahmad Waqef	Aljazeera English service	Threat	Unidentified armed persons	Kunduz	30/8/2013	He received threats after he developed a report on Qala Zal district. He was threatened for writing too much about the district
31	Nasir Ahmad Sadeq	1 TV station	Threat	Chief of police of Takhar	Takhar	30/10/2013	He was interviewing Chief of Police of Takhar province. His questions infuriated the man so it made the Chief of Police to scold and threaten him.
32	Faruq Jan Mangal	New York Times	Threat	Haqqani Network	Khost	14/11/2013	He cooperated with a New York Times reporter in relation to a story on the decline in Haqqani Network's popularity in the eastern region. Subsequently, Haqqani network threatened him to death.
33	Farid Zaher	Radio Deutsche welle	Threatened to death	Powerful family	Khost	4/12/2013	Farid was assisting a group of journalists from Kabul who was on a visit to Khost Province for a few days. There is a powerful family in Khost. They do anything they want and no one can stop them. As Farid gave his journalist friend information about Khost, he also mentioned this family. When the journalist returned to Kabul, he aired a report on the mentioned family. Then members of that family threatened Farid to death stating their suspicion that Farid had

							talked about them to the journalist because they had seen him accompanying the journalist.
34	Nematullah Meenapal	Aljazeera English service	Arrest	ISAF	Kandahar	11/14/2013	He was in Jherai district to interview the Taliban when ISAF attacked. The Taliban managed to flee and Nemat was arrested by ISAF and given to the police. After two days of investigation it became evident that he was a journalist and not a Taliban fighter.
35	Ahmad Ludin	Shamshad TV	Verbal assault	Chief of Police	Kandahar	11/8/2013	He inquired about the increase in killings, kidnapping and other crimes in Kandahar city. The Chief of Police scolded him and called his spokesman and instructed him not to give Ludin any information in the future.

### Media and the 2014 Elections

Quality and professional work of media and journalists during election process is of paramount importance in countries with active conflict, post conflict countries and countries in transition with uncertain political situation. Therefore, ethical and careful reporting is the key element in preventing conflict during and after elections and strengthening democracy. Since Afghanistan is also a country with ongoing war and fledgling political system, professional and conflict-sensitive coverage of elections will play an extremely important role in shaping this process and public mindset in regard to execution of this process. On the other hand, since in election processes the public perception of the transparency of the process is as much important as the implementation of the process itself, media have a vital role in shaping such perceptions. And the success of the election process and its positive outcome is determined by its legitimacy.

Just as the Afghan government does not have adequate experience in administering election process, media also lacks adequate experience in providing coverage for the process. Since election coverage is a very sensitive task, media should be extremely cautious while dealing with this process and should never deviate from their professional framework.

According to AJSC's findings, the approach of a large number of journalists to election coverage during the previous elections (2010 parliamentary elections, 2009 presidential elections), lacked the needed professional demands, particularly on the electionday. For example, some reporters reported fraud in certain polling stations without having adequate substantiating evidence in hand. Some others forgot professional precision as they directly broadcast allegations without verifying them. Meanwhile, some outlets, which are not independent and pursue a specific agenda, covered elections in a biased way that served their own agenda. This kind of coverage not only obscured the reporting space but also encouraged other media to take position. For example, a presidential candidate complained that a local TV in Nangarhar Province had reported his votes less than the actual figure. After investigation, it was revealed that the candidate really had around ten thousand votes while the mentioned TV station had declared his votes one thousand and five hundred. This is a good example of the immaturity and biased way of election coverage of a number of journalists and media outlets. AJSC foresees a similar atmosphere in the coming presidential election even with some level of increase in ethnic-oriented reporting unless robust training program is provided to journalists who will be covering elections.

Unprofessional, provocative and hateful reporting by biased media in countries with similar social and political dynamics as Afghanistan has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. For instance, in the African country of Rwanda, in 1994, the hateful commentaries and rumors spread by a radio and TV station against Tutsi tribe sparked a genocide of more than half a million people from Tutsi tribe by the opposite Hutu tribe in a matter of five weeks. This radio and TV channel, called RTLM, often broadcast hate speech and provocative content demonizing the Tutsi tribe in different ways. The final hateful commentary to lead to the genocide was when RTLM called Tutsi tribe 'cockroaches' and called on others to eliminate them. Subsequently, the bigger tribe Hutu started the genocide as a result of which around 660,000 people were killed.

Similarly, unprofessional coverage of elections during presidential elections in Kenya in 2007 served as one of the main causes of crisis in that country. As soon as the victory of one of the candidates was announced after the run off, the opposite party staged demonstrations all over the country that gradually turned violent. The differences between the two parties slowly became ethnicized and left 1,200 to 1,500 dead and more than half a million people internally displaced. In this country too, the unethical reporting aimed at fueling hatred between the ethnicities served as a catalyst for the massacre. Additionally, the unprofessional presenters of roundtable shows in certain TV channels further deepened the ethnic differences and hatred which altogether paved the way for this massacre.

Unfortunately, Afghanistan also suffers from divide across ethnic lines and some media outlets operate solely for the promotion of certain interests rather than serving the public interest. Furthermore, some other media outlets have been propped up to promote the government agendas. Such exploitation of the media has made the profession vulnerable for misuse and will thus undermine the public trust for media.

Additionally, interference, intimidation and enticement by local warlords, intimidation by the Taliban and other armed groups, reluctance of government bodies in sharing information with journalists

constitute other challenges of media coverage during elections. Coercion and enticement was massively used in the previous elections to influence the content. To clarify the matter further, a few examples from the previous elections are listed below:

Asadullah Jalalzai who is local BBC stringer in Ghazni Province says that the media coverage of previous elections were made difficult by issues such as security threats and use of force and intimidation by some of both presidential and provincial council candidates. Citing one of his memories from the 2009 presidential elections, he says he saw a local militia commander during the previous elections with a bunch of ballot papers, which he was stuffing into the ballot box. He says he tried to record that scene but he failed because the commander had his armed people around him. He says he also could not name the commander in his reporting because of the fear of his life. He also mentioned that one of the provincial council candidates offered him money to have him work in his favor in his reporting work.

Mr. Jalalzai also says that governor of Dah Yak district of Ghazni province, Hajji Fazel Ahmad, who ran for parliament seat in the previous parliamentary elections, hosted a gathering in which he gave out \$50 to \$100 to all journalists as a gift to influence their reporting of him and his campaigning.

Mr. Jalalzai believes there will be much of such practices throughout the coming elections as well.

Similar trend has been noticed during previous presidential, parliamentary and provincial council elections in many other provinces as well. For instance, a journalist, on condition of anonymity, revealed that Rozi Khan a presidential candidate in the previous elections had held a press conference at his home where he gave out ten journalists AFN 1,000 each.

In some cases, supporters of certain candidates, in an attempt to influence reporting of journalists, even provided journalists with specific lines to describe their candidates in their reporting.

## **Dissemination of Information**

The previous elections saw issues such as hasty and inaccurate reporting. Every time a word of mouth involved allegation of fraud in a polling station, some journalists would disseminate the news without verifying it so that they could be the first to air that news. As a result, they would face reactions by the Independent Elections Commission or the candidate in question. A similar incident took place in Laghman Province where rumors said that the ballot boxes were being filled by supporters of a particular candidate. Some journalists aired that news right away while some others avoided doing so. Additionally, due to security challenges, journalists were not able to cover all polling centers, particularly those located in far-flung areas. This undermined the role of media as election observers. It is very important to keep in mind that in majority of cases, fraud occurs in the remote areas and not in city centers. During previous elections, in some provinces such as Kunduz, journalists were not allowed entry in female polling stations for cultural reasons, thus media were not able to provide oversight in those polling stations.

Although journalists express satisfaction with the Independent Elections Commission in terms of facilitating electoral information, they fear potential attacks by the Taliban on the polling stations on the election day. Tolo News Correspondent Shakila Ibrahimkhel says that contrary to other provinces, going to polling stations was easier in Kabul; however, she also voices fears from Taliban attacking polling stations in the polling sites in the outskirts of Kabul and elsewhere in the country.

Tamim Hamid, Editor in Chief of 2014 Weekly, however, says the IEC could meet expectations in terms of dissemination of information in Kabul but when he went to Takhar Province to cover the 2009 presidential elections, he found the situation quite different. There, access to electoral information was limited, signs of warlords' pressure on electoral officials were evident and it was difficult to obtain the required information on the voting process. Mr. Hameed claims the number of police forces were very limited in some polling stations. According to him, as this report was aired, the then security chief of Takhar province ordered his subordinates that Tamim should not make it out of that province, thus this report turned to a big headache for him. According to Tamim, when journalists are sent from Kabul to remote areas for election coverage, they cannot report from remote areas because they will inevitably face warlords' reaction and intimidation. They therefore have to first get back to a safe place and then publish their report. In this case the story will usually become either outdated or less effective.

Lack of Access to Information law is the most handicapping factor ahead of media workers and their ability to obtain information from the government. Alongside that, some media outlets are in complete divergence from the ethical and professional practice of media. They not only work in favor of political parties but also perpetuate fear and hatred among people. This especially applies to these stations' political talk shows, which are often hosted by unprofessional presenters. In 2013, for the first time in the history of open media in Afghanistan, Zhwandoon TV – a private TV station, which follows ethnic agenda – hosted a roundtable debate where one of the panelists made affronting remarks about a specific ethnic group and his inflammatory remarks pushed the country to the verge of crisis. The incident demonstrated Afghanistan's vulnerability and should be seen as an alarm by all media alerting them to take extra caution in such matters because their small mistake can create a crisis of national magnitude.

### **The Impact of Social Media and their Use During Elections**

While access to social media is poor in the remote or insecure areas, many especially the youth are frequent users of social media in cities and areas with Internet services. Social media have not only become a good tool for dissemination of information in Afghanistan but they also enable impartation of personal comments, views, aspirations and grievances. Social Media is massively used as a tool in the election campaigns, both by the candidates and their supporters. Social media has created the needed platform where people can interact and change views about various subject matters. More importantly, they have become the source, which has allowed citizen journalism to flourish in the country. Today citizens play an increasingly important role in shaping debate about social ills by capturing them in their mobile phones and posting them on Facebook or Twitter. The extensive debate about the subject

among the users and the ensuing pressure has prompted Afghan government to take firm action about many of the incidents posted on the social media by the citizens, which ranges from the improper behavior of government and security forces to prominent issues of corruption.

One of the advantages of social media is that users can use them to cross geographical borders. They are also characterized by the platform they offer users to share comments on any matter. One of the users of social media cites an example of how social media helped reconcile differences in viewpoints of three users from Australia, Islamabad and Kabul about a candidate leading them to accept unanimously that the candidate in question could be a better option despite not having all the characteristics of a good president.

Some of the users say that the advantage of using Facebook and the reason why they are using it is that it enables them to get their message across in the real time and without censorship, while this would not be possible otherwise.

A resident of Ghazni Province says social media are easy to access and are free of censorship enabling all to make their points. The poor and the wealthy can use them equally. According to him, some of the provincial council candidates in that province are so supportive of the social media that they have assigned wages for youth who campaign for them through social media especially Facebook.

But social media at a smaller proportion have simultaneously become a tool for hate speech and propaganda as well. Some users use social media to sabotage other personalities by imparting rumors against them, thus paving the way for discord and hatred. Although the number of such users is limited compared with those who use the social media in a civilized and ethical way; unfortunately, their destructive activities draw a lot of attention. However, due to the possibility of posting opposing reasoning against rumors in the social media, rumors do not prove as much effective in these platforms. Social Media is part of the broad approach of Afghan Journalists Safety Committee's approach on safety package. AJSC has been training journalists and young activists in ethical and successful use of social media since 2011.

## Conclusion

1. The increase in the level of threats and challenges against journalists alarms that the future of journalism and media is in jeopardy. The major reason for this concern includes not only unwillingness of the Afghan government to ensure safe working environment for journalists but also the active part government officials take in exercising violence against journalists. Additionally, the atmosphere of lack of support for media workers has resulted in a situation where anyone who wants can threaten journalists and commit violence against them without any fear of prosecution. With the diminishing presence of the international community, support to values such as freedom of expression is dropping which in itself will contribute to increased violence and threats against journalists. On the other hand, the government does not seem at all to be willing to safeguard freedom of expression and media as its biggest achievement. Weakening the role of media will shake the pillars of strengthening and

institutionalization of democracy and compromise the most effective tool in fighting other misfortunes in the country such as administrative corruption, unhealthy governance and violation of the human rights especially women's rights.

2. Growing reluctance of government in providing information to journalists remains a major challenge. The Access to Information Act, which can undoubtedly resolve a great deal of journalists' problems in terms of obtaining information on a timely basis, remains unapproved and the government does not show the interest required to take the act to parliament for approval. Moreover, the parliament's hostile stand against freedom of expression is also a matter of great concern and further diminishes hopes for expanding the space for media workers.

3. Low professional capacity of journalists poses yet another challenge to this profession loosening the pillars which underpin freedom of expression. When it comes to elections, lack of professional capacity not only undermines the credibility and legitimacy of journalism as a profession, but also it could potentially further expand the ethnic divide over electoral matters if it does not act professionally. This could prove disastrous because differences on the basis of ethnicity and language remain a major challenge so judicious and conflict-sensitive reporting is needed much more than any other period in the history of media in the past decade. In addition, lack of adequate knowledge of the basics and principles of journalism and lack of code of ethics and other regulatory mechanisms will continue to serve as the landmark factors of perpetuation of violence.

4. Efforts during previous elections to entice journalists mostly in provinces and potential large scale attempts to influence news content with the help of money and other offers during the upcoming elections set for April 2014 constitute some of the great concerns. By submission to such offers journalists not only severely damage their own reputation but also compromise the integrity of the profession.

4. Media outlets founded to pursue goals and objectives other than that of serving public interests not only makes zero contribution to flourishing of the sector but also undermines the credibility and legitimacy of journalism as a profession. Also, media outlets established by some government officials with a view to increase the government's influence, defend its agenda and marginalize its opponents and contenders, are more likely to confuse the public and undermine credibility of media. On the other hand, dependent and biased media will tend to thrive as the volume of the international aid decreases thereby increasing the chances of the independent media being influenced and utilized to further the interests of different countries especially the neighboring countries which use mass media as a propaganda tool.

5. Non-enforcement of the mass media law and lack of regulatory mechanisms such as code of ethics, code of conduct, editorial policy etc. has caused lack of order within the media sector of the country. Ministry of Information and Culture, as a line ministry for regulating the activities of the media outlets has had no achievement in this regard and the pitfall continues to persist. As a result, media outlets that operate contrary to the standards and principles and pursue specific agenda continue to operate

without being confronted for their malpractice. Media will never achieve the needed professional maturity unless meaningful regulatory mechanism is developed and enforced.

## Recommendations

1. Given that freedom of expression and plethora of media outlets is the biggest achievement of freedom of expression, support for journalists' safety is essential for preserving and protecting the achievement which is a gain of the Afghan people, an achievement of the Afghan government and a credit to international community's investment. Any surmises that freedom of expression and multiplicity of media outlets can be maintained without establishing a safe working environment is void, and the government of Afghanistan should adopt practicable and effective measure in this regard. One the solutions could be enacting the law on elimination of violence against journalists and its vigorous enforcement by the government. Moreover, Ministry of Information and Culture should raise awareness of all government entities, especially security bodies that are responsible for a significant proportion of the incidents of violence against journalists, on journalists' rights to cover events and the government's obligation to facilitate this. Also it should serve as a bridge between media and government bodies. The international community should also defend journalists' safety and adopt a clear stand to safeguard freedom of expression and other achievements of the media sector that are owing to their huge investments
2. Given that lack of Access to Information Act is the reason behind the majority of journalists' problems, Ministry of Information and Culture should play an active role in following up with this law until it is endorsed. Meanwhile, the media support organizations should coordinate their efforts to get this law endorsed.
3. Instead of putting pressure on journalists and media outlets, Ministry of Information and Culture should work with them to enhance their professional knowledge, adopt codes of ethics and establish codes of conduct and editorial policy. Increasing pressure on journalists is not a wise solution and has not proven to be useful as it will only result in increased distance between government and journalists and will undermine the constructive role of media. Meanwhile, media support organizations should work with journalists to enhance their knowledge on codes of ethics, conflict-sensitive journalism and election coverage; as well as assist media outlets in developing their reporting polices. At this point, such trainings should primarily target the presenters of political talk shows since their shoes have sometimes been hijacked and used as a platform for disseminating hatred and discord. Furthermore, journalists should be made aware of their primary goal which is serving the public interests. Such trainings will also help journalists avoid misuse of the profession and being enticed. A systematic monitoring mechanism needs to be created in order to oversee the standards in the work of media and their consistency with principles and ethics of journalism and regularly report on media outlets' performance. The Federation of Afghan Journalists is the most suitable structure for this purpose. This mechanism can play an important role in reducing the unprofessional exercise of the profession and compelling the biased media to professional work.

4. In the run up to the elections, media should promote dialogue between politicians and the public. Given that Afghanistan has a great exercise of democracy ahead, it is very important to promote this role. Meanwhile media should produce programs on elections awareness for their audience. Today more than any other time a national participatory discourse on the future of the country is direly needed. Media can play a key role in this regard.
5. Media outlets supported by political parties should strive to remain balanced in their reporting of elections and avoid destroying opponents. Moreover, the media outlets owned by senior government officials need to adopt neutral stand in relation to the situation. All media organizations need to develop specific guidelines on elections news coverage and train their staff in this regard. Also, Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), which is meant to be the only public broadcaster, should shift from serving the interest of the government to becoming the voice of the public. RTA can become the definer of agenda and the symbol of independence, balance and focus on key issues among media in the country.
6. The international community needs to have a strategic approach to strengthening and developing the media outlets and avoid sporadic/ uncoordinated measures on this front. Support to media used to be preferential and lacked the required coordination between donors. A coordinated approach is key to solidifying and expanding media and freedom of expression. Additionally, international community needs to focus on improving the safety environment for Afghan journalists and it should advocate for this with its Afghan counterparts.
7. The local media support organizations need further cooperation and coordination and should have a strategic approach when it comes to defending the rights of journalists. Meanwhile they should strive to serve as catalyst between the government and media on issues of promoting transparent and professional reporting and enhancing media workers' safety.