



Afghanistan's Media Crisis

One year after the Taliban's return to power



A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists

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Cover photo: Taliban members (right) attack journalists covering a women's rights protest in Kabul on October 21, 2021. (AFP/Bulent Kilic)

About this report

The Taliban's August 2021 takeback of power in Afghanistan has had a devastating effect on the vibrant media landscape that developed after the U.S.-led invasion 20 years earlier. Between censorship, arrests, assaults, restrictions on women journalists, the flight of experienced reporters, and the country's declining economy, Afghan media are struggling to survive. Yet in spite of these challenges, CPJ's interviews with numerous Afghan journalists and media experts show glimmers of hope amid the difficulties. Afghan journalists are finding ways to keep covering the news—either from inside the country or from their places of exile.

This report also includes CPJ's recommendations to governments, international organizations, and the Taliban—the country's *de facto* authorities—for facilitating media freedom and ensuring the safety of journalists in Afghanistan.

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Afghanistan's media faces crisis—and opportunity

Twelve months after the Taliban takeover, many Afghan journalists are out of work or on the run. Others try, very carefully, to challenge the powerful.

By Steven Butler

The extreme distress that has gripped Afghanistan's independent media since the Taliban seized power in Kabul on August 15 last year lands in my inbox—and the inboxes of many of my colleagues at the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)—almost every day.

The messages come from journalists who just a year ago worked for Afghanistan's then-thriving, free-wheeling newspaper or broadcast outlets. Some journalists write with stories of detention and beatings by the Taliban. Some detail their own destitution. Many, desperate to leave Afghanistan, appeal for help. Still other journalists write to say they made it out of the country, but are stuck on temporary visas in places like Pakistan or Turkey. Running short of money and often unable to get onward visas—the U.S. government is [rejecting](#) more than 90% of Afghans seeking to enter the country on humanitarian grounds—they're fearful of being sent home to an uncertain fate.

Such pleas are just one measure of the crisis that has hit Afghanistan's diverse independent media since the Taliban took back control of Afghanistan amid the withdrawal of U.S. forces last year. They also document, however, the perseverance and determination of journalists who understand the importance of reporting fact-based stories. Many of the country's journalists remain determined to carry on—from both inside and outside of the country—in the hope that Afghanistan's independent media will continue to play a vital role.

As detailed in this series of articles CPJ is publishing on the one-year anniversary of the Taliban takeover, the challenges Afghan journalists face are severe, ranging from [physical abuse](#) and censorship to particular constraints

placed on women. But some journalists also see glints of opportunity. The war that for so long devastated the country—and made so many regions no-go zones—is over, at least for now. There are fresh stories to tell, and a new regime that needs to be held accountable.

PERILOUS WORK

Afghanistan's free media was a rare success story of the former regime, but even then, journalism was perilous work. Rival parties—including government intelligence agents, the Taliban, and the Islamic State—often targeted reporters. “In the year or year-and-a-half before the Taliban takeover, it was especially dangerous for journalists,” says Kathy Gannon, who reported on Afghanistan for more than three decades for The Associated Press. “You didn't know who was targeting who, and they would blame each other.”

It remains a mystery, for example, which group was behind the 2020 murder of [Rahmatullah Nikzad](#), a freelance journalist who contributed to international outlets, or who planted the car bomb that killed 23-year-old, female news presenter [Mina Khairi](#) of Ariana News in June 2021.

From 2001 until today, some 53 journalists have been killed in Afghanistan in connection with their work; of those, 27 were murdered, meaning intentionally targeted, according to [CPJ data](#). And of the 27 murdered, prosecutors obtained [convictions](#) in the cases of just four journalists killed in 2001.

Because of that dismal record, Afghanistan ranked 5th in CPJ's most recent [impunity index](#), which gauges the



TOLONews presenter Nisar Nabil wears a black mask during a live broadcast on May 25, 2022. Male journalists at the station wore the masks as a protest against the Taliban's order that women presenters had to cover their faces on air. (AFP/Wakil Kohsar)

worst countries for seeking justice when journalists are murdered. Since the Taliban mid-August takeover, CPJ, thankfully, has [not documented](#) any further assassinations of journalists by Taliban, at least so far. But dangers still abound. A recent [UN report](#) found that six journalists had died between August 15, 2021, and June 15, 2022. According to the report, five were killed by self-identified members of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant - Khorasan Province; one by unknown perpetrators. (CPJ has not found evidence that their deaths were related to their work as journalists.)

DISTURBING TRENDS

Surveys conducted under difficult circumstances and published during the past year differ in specifics, but show very disturbing trends: Huge declines in the numbers of newspapers, radio stations, and other news sources, as well as a collapse in the number of women journalists.

Fear has spurred some of this downturn. The Taliban has imposed pressure, sometimes violently, on news outlets to conform to its fundamentalist ideology. Taliban fighters, for instance, detained and severely beat reporters from Etilaatroz newspaper who were covering a street protest in September 2021, as CPJ has [reported](#). The Taliban also visited the newspaper's office and warned them against using critical language or unacceptable terms—for example, saying “Taliban group” instead of their preferred name, “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.”

“You have to be on the Taliban side or they will close your office,” [Etilaatroz online editor](#) Elyas Nawandish told an international journalism festival in April. Some Etilaatroz staff quit, and much of the remaining staff is now spread among Albania, Spain, and the United States. Those still in Afghanistan are working underground, Nawandish says, but Etilaatroz is trying to help them leave.

The Taliban's arrival led Etilaatroz, which specializes in investigative reporting, to stop printing and move

exclusively online. The company had lost the advertising and subscription fees needed to sustain its print operations.

Indeed, the extreme downturn in Afghanistan's economy has robbed all media properties of advertising and other sources of income. "It's beyond catastrophic," Saad Mohseni, CEO of the Moby Group, which owns and operates Afghanistan's [largest news and entertainment network](#), TOLONews and TOLO TV, said of the [decline](#) in Afghanistan's economy.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, foreign assistance amounted to about 45% of the economy, according to the [World Bank](#), and roughly [75% of government expenditures](#). Those foreign inflows came to an abrupt halt last August. At the same time, U.S. President Joe Biden issued [an executive order](#) to take \$7 billion of frozen Afghan funds from the country's central bank and designate half for humanitarian aid for Afghanistan, while [airlifting](#) some 130,000 often well-educated Afghans out of the country in just two weeks.

While the outright killing of journalists by the Taliban may have stopped, CPJ has documented a steady stream

of Taliban-perpetrated [incidents](#) aimed at intimidating and punishing reporters and editors, including arbitrary detention and beatings, sometimes severe. Although the Taliban's Ministry of Information and Culture initially seemed to take the lead in managing the media, CPJ has [documented](#) that the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) has increasingly come to play a leading role.

Other trendlines are also moving in a worrisome direction. In April, a Taliban military court in Herat sentenced journalist Khalid Qaderi to a year in prison for allegedly spreading anti-regime propaganda and ["committing espionage for foreign media outlets."](#) It was the first incident that CPJ has [documented](#) of a journalist being tried, convicted, and sentenced for their work since the Taliban takeover. According to the recent [UN report](#), 163 of 173 human rights violations affecting journalists and media workers in the first 10 months of the Taliban's return to power were attributed to "the *de facto* authorities." These included 122 instances of arbitrary arrest and detention, 58 instances of ill-treatment, 33 instances of threats and intimidation, and 12 instances of incommunicado detention.



Afghan journalists attend a press conference in Kabul on May 24, 2022. (AFP/Wakil Kohsar)



Taliban fighters patrol a Kabul street on August 31, 2021, 16 days after the group took back control of the country amid the withdrawal of U.S. troops. (AFP/Hoshang Hashimi)

GAUGING LIMITS

Journalists who keep working have to do so with great caution. For better and worse, however, that isn't completely new to them. Ali Latifi, an experienced reporter and dual U.S.-Afghan citizen who contributes to international media, says there's always been an element of caution in reporting on Afghanistan. Reporters routinely had to weigh the risks of retaliation, particularly when reporting on sensitive subjects. Those pressures are just more severe today.

"How much are you going to say online?" says Latifi. "Is a statement you make online valuable enough to take the risk of getting you in trouble?"

Taliban have stopped and questioned Latifi, but he cooperated and says he didn't face trouble. Some stories, however—such as covering protests by women—provoke an immediate backlash. "People are trying to figure out the lines—what you can do [and what you can't do]," he says. Out of a general sense of caution, Latifi has started

taking more care to protect sources.

Gannon says that for her, reporting in Afghanistan didn't change significantly from what she faced under the previous government—although she recognizes that local journalists come under more scrutiny, and can be subject to harsher repercussions. There's one positive difference, she says: It's safer to travel the roads of Afghanistan since the fighting has stopped.

Still, the road ahead for foreign journalists is far from open. "They are pretty thin-skinned about the image of them that is presented to the world," says Lynne O'Donnell, an Australian journalist and columnist for *Foreign Policy* magazine, speaking of the Taliban. On July 19, O'Donnell, a veteran of Afghanistan reporting who had arrived in Kabul just days earlier, was detained by agents from the GDI and forced, under threat of imprisonment, to [tweet an apology](#) for earlier stories she had written about forced marriage to Taliban fighters. After posting a short text dictated by the Taliban, she was allowed to leave the country,

and later vowed [never to return](#). “It’s fear that is the basis of their power,” O’Donnell said of Taliban rule in an interview with CPJ. “They are becoming much more efficient in ensuring that people are afraid.”

LESS PROVOCATIVE

Mohseni, an Afghan Australian based in Dubai, says that TOLO still broadcasts on controversial subjects. “Every single issue that we need to cover, we cover,” he says. “So whether it’s about extrajudicial killings, or the fighting in Panjshir; certainly girls’ education, targeting of minorities—every single thing that we need to cover, we’ve covered.” Mohseni adds, however, that TOLO’s broadcasts are intentionally less provocative than what the station produced under the previous government.

“Less provocative” may be coded language for “self-censorship,” an approach that allows many journalists around the world to continue reporting in environments that are hostile to press freedom by avoiding language and ideas that authorities find offensive. TOLO and other Afghan

news outlets have had to make their own decisions about where the boundaries are, and how far to push them. That hasn’t always protected them.

Journalists and managers at the independently owned Ariana News network, for example, told CPJ of working under dire conditions in the year since the Taliban took back control of Afghanistan. Staff say the beatings, interrogations, harassment, censorship, and dismissal of female employees are emblematic of the difficulties faced by other Afghan media organizations—and that they have squeezed the formerly robust outlet to what they fear might be the brink of closure.

At TOLO, agents from the GDI arrived at the station on March 17 and took news presenter Bahram Aman, news manager Khapalwak Sapai, and the channel’s legal adviser [into custody](#). “I said, why me?” Aman later told CPJ. “They told me that I am a spy and so on.”

Aman was held in isolation for a day in a dark room and released. The immediate issue, it turned out, was that the GDI objected to a news report saying the agency was behind a directive banning the broadcasting of foreign



Two TOLO News presenters work with their faces covered in Kabul, on May 22, 2022. (Reuters/Ali Khara)

soap operas. According to Aman, the GDI had previously warned the station not to mention the agency in the news, but Aman just read the script handed to him that night. He also talked about the story of his detention on air after he was released, which led to further threats, he told CPJ. Aman added that the Taliban were angry at him because of previous shows where he'd aggressively questioned their representatives on air. He has since fled the country.

Still, TOLO appears to have faced relatively fewer issues, compared to Ariana. That may be because Mohseni is more amenable to working with the Taliban than his public statements suggest. "Tolo has tried to adjust to the new environment," says Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia program at the Wilson Center, a non-partisan think tank based in Washington, D.C. "They have not been going out of their way to criticize the Taliban."

An experienced Afghan journalist, who requested anonymity so he could speak freely about Mohseni, said: "He's doing whatever it takes to keep his channel going. He's not a journalist. I think Saad [Mohseni] wants to be a player and he uses his media outlet to be that. Still, added the journalist, "I think their journalists are amazing and they want to tell the truth."

Despite pressures to reduce the profile and role of women, TOLO has made a point of hiring more women, with 21 women journalists on the staff today compared to eight in August last year. When the Taliban in May forced women on-air to [cover their faces](#) below the eyes, male journalists at the station [staged a protest](#) by [masking up](#) for four days. While the move attracted conservative attacks on social media, the Taliban did not otherwise react to it, says Mohseni. In fact, while many TOLO staff fled the country in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover, TOLO has continued to hire replacements,

keeping staff levels at around 80."

In many parts of the south, and districts and provinces where we could not go because of the violence, now we can go and we can report on local issues," he says. "We've gone from 17 local stories to 22 to 25 a day. So we have a much bigger coverage in terms of the news than we did before."

Mohseni says the station has stayed afloat because of a corporate decision to support the operations, not because it's making money. [Moby](#) operates news and entertainment services in South and Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. He's searching for other forms of financial backing to keep TOLO going.

Mohseni believes that news coverage of controversial issues, such as girls' education, has played a key role in shaping public opinion, which he says the Taliban are sensitive to and which could, over time, strengthen moderate voices within the leadership. "There's perhaps a narrow path to something positive emerging from all of this," he says, while also recognizing that whatever limited freedoms are left could be shut down at any time.

For the journalists who flood my inbox with messages like "Please help me Mr. Butler," or—referring to the Taliban—"They will assassinate me or a member of my family," the future seems impossibly bleak. Yet many hundreds of journalists remain on the job in Afghanistan, navigating a dangerous new political landscape, while others try to report from exile. They believe their work can still make a difference in the future of their country and the lives of their fellow Afghans. ♦

Steven Butler is a senior program consultant for CPJ. He previously served as CPJ's Asia program coordinator and has worked as a journalist throughout Asia.

Inside an Afghan news network's struggle to survive

Threats, insults, beatings, and censorship: Former Ariana News staffers detail dire challenges during a year under Taliban control

By Waliullah Rahmani

For veteran journalist Sharif Hassanyar, the final breaking point came in September last year. The Taliban had ousted the elected government of Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani almost a month earlier, and the last American soldiers had since withdrawn in a chaotic race to get out. As head of Ariana News, an independently owned television station, Hassanyar had initially instructed his panicked staff to stay focused on their work. “We knew that under a Taliban regime all civil liberties would be very limited,” Hassanyar told me. “But despite all of this, I would try to keep the morale of our colleagues high... and encourage our staff to work fearlessly.”

Steadily, pressures grew—directly from Taliban operatives who beat some journalists or visited the homes of others who were in hiding, and indirectly from Ariana executives who would say the station had to self-censor out of caution. Hassanyar himself felt directly threatened, and left the country for Pakistan on September 1. From there, he ran the news operation remotely, still believing it might be possible for the station to continue covering live events as before. When one of his news managers contacted him to ask for guidance on how to cover a [protest by scores of Afghan women](#), Hassanyar instructed him to broadcast the protest live and invite Afghan analysts to discuss it on air.

It didn't take long for Hassanyar's cell phone to start ringing. Taliban intelligence officials called several times, demanding that he shut down the broadcast. Hassanyar didn't cave to Taliban orders right away, but a short time later, bearded Taliban intelligence officials arrived at Ariana's offices in the Bayat Media Center. They threatened

that if live coverage of the women's demonstration didn't end immediately, Taliban militiamen would close the gates of the BMC complex and prevent employees from leaving or entering the building.

Afghan American business executive and philanthropist Ehsanollah “Ehsan” Bayat had built the BMC, a five-story building roughly six kilometers (3.7 miles) from the Afghan presidential palace, in 2014. In addition to being the headquarters of Bayat's media operations, the BMC also houses the Afghan Wireless Telecommunication Company (AWCC), in which Bayat has a majority stake, and which has more than 5,000 employees. With so many people's livelihoods and safety at stake, Hassanyar—under pressure not only from the Taliban at this point, but also from senior executives from within his organization—ordered his staff to cut off coverage of the women protestors.

A short time later, on September 10, Hassanyar quit Ariana News.

Hassanyar is one of countless Afghan journalists whose dreams of a free media in Afghanistan have come to a rapid end. Many lost their jobs when the Taliban takeover led to economic collapse. Others, like him, have fled the country to escape Taliban repression. Hassanyar gave up his home, leaving behind his father, mother, and several siblings, and he largely relinquished his aspirations to help build a more free and democratic Afghanistan.

INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT

The story of Ariana News, once one of the more influential networks in Afghanistan, reflects the troubles all media in



An Ariana News presenter delivers a news broadcast on sister network Ariana Radio and Television Network (ATN). The Taliban's ban on soap operas and other entertainment programs has reduced the content available to ATN. (Screenshot: ATN/YouTube)

the country now face. Around the time of Hassanyar's departure, the Taliban—including operatives from the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI)—[launched](#) a wave of censorship, threats, intimidation, detention, beating, and harassment of journalists at Ariana News and other outlets. After Hassanyar's departure, the increased repression caused at least three of his successors as head of Ariana News to flee Afghanistan, too.

Now, a full year after the Taliban takeover, critical news gathering in Afghanistan by local media remains very difficult. It requires patience and courage—a willingness by reporters and TV news presenters to put themselves, their families, and others at risk. In such dire circumstances, it's perhaps hard to recall that the blossoming of Afghanistan's media was one of the great success stories of the period when U.S. and international forces oversaw the country. Thousands of Afghan reporters, including hundreds of women, worked for burgeoning numbers of newspapers, radio stations, and television outlets. International donors,

including the U.S. government and military, [provided](#) tens of millions of dollars in support. In a country that two decades earlier—during the Taliban's first stint in power—didn't allow television or photography at all, large numbers of young people were competing to join the news industry.

Ariana News and its sister company, [Ariana Radio and Television Network](#) (ATN), delivered news, music, culture, and even comedy to Afghanistan's 34 provinces. The Bayat business conglomerate established ATN in 2005, almost four years after U.S. and international forces toppled the Taliban in response to the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States. ATN was focused on entertainment, soap operas, current affairs, and sports coverage. By 2014—a period of hope and idealism—Bayat decided to create a sister station devoted entirely to news.

He approached Hassanyar, then a senior manager at TOLONews, another independent 24/7 TV station, to help bring the idea to fruition. Hassanyar says Bayat pitched him on the new venture by saying that his aim was to

promote freedom of speech and bolster the democratic system.

Hassanyar was enthusiastic about running the new station, and in turn asked for full authority—free from any intervention by the owner or his business executives—as a condition for accepting the offer. He says Bayat agreed, provided Ariana would not favor any political group, and that newscasters would not directly insult any Afghan. Hassanyar accepted those conditions, and took the job.

Bayat didn't always stick to his commitment, according to two other former Ariana News executives who did not want to be named, but his interventions were rare in the early years of Ariana News' broadcasting. In one case, they said, Bayat quashed an investigation into a land issue saying it could undermine contracts he had with international forces and harm his relations with the Afghan government. (When CPJ asked Bayat for comment on this and other matters, a spokesperson declined to provide CPJ's list of questions to Bayat and instead forwarded to CPJ a written statement from current ATN managing director Habib Durrani. "After more than 17 years of operation in such a fast paced, rapidly changing environment, employees will disagree and have different opinions and perspectives on a wide variety of issues," Durrani's statement said in part.)

The two stations began to suffer, however, as the Taliban insurgency was [spreading](#). By 2018, journalists were getting wounded or [killed](#) in increasing numbers, and the former executives said Bayat intervened more frequently in coverage. By 2020, COVID-19 was also raging through the country, undermining the economy and hurting business.

Ariana News closed its two provincial stations in Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif in 2020 and laid off most of its staff in the two provinces, including many women. According to Hassanyar, former Ariana News head Ali Asghari, and Waris Hasrat, a former political programs manager at the network, ATN and Ariana News had already shed roughly 130 employees by the time the Ghani government fell in 2021, bringing the total number to around 270.

FORCED RESIGNATIONS

The 2021 Taliban takeover, however, precipitated a full-scale gutting of most Afghan media. According to Hassanyar, several ATN and Ariana News TV presenters and female employees simply left their jobs when Kabul fell on August 15. The full story, however, is more complex. [Roya Naderi](#), who hosted morning programs focused on social issues and was one of ATN's most popular presenters, told

CPJ that she was in the office on that day. Ariana executives told women at ATN to leave the TV station as the Taliban were approaching the city. Naderi told CPJ that when she arrived home, she put on long black clothes, fearing what might happen if Taliban militiamen saw her dressed otherwise—and waited to see what her future would be.

Four days later, Naderi recalls, someone from the HR department of ATN called to ask for her resignation, saying the Taliban wouldn't tolerate female presenters. She says that even though she and others feared Taliban reprisals, they wanted to return to work because they desperately needed the income. But Naderi says she and many of her female colleagues were forced to resign regardless. (A spokesperson for ATN's HR department told CPJ by messaging app that it had not fired employees mentioned in this article "due to so called 'pressure' from the Taliban," and disputed that some had been let go.)

Ariana News executives took a different approach than ATN. Representatives of several news outfits, including Hassanyar, had banded together in early 2021 to form a watchdog group called the [Afghanistan Freedom of Speech Hub](#). After the Taliban takeover, they decided they would continue to put women broadcasters on air.

Fawzia Wahdat, a presenter with Ariana News, told CPJ she was able to continue presenting news on-air until November 9 last year. She had worked for Ariana News for about a decade until that point. After the takeover, she says, Taliban intelligence operatives forced Ariana to segregate male and female employees into separate work spaces—an account confirmed by two former senior managers of Ariana News. Ariana's HR staff, apparently at Taliban direction, instructed female employees to wear long black robes.

During most of the period from 2004 to 2021, "we worked with complete freedom," Wahdat told CPJ. "But with the Taliban's takeover, all programs, producers, news writers, and presenters were under pressure... Often, producers would give us specific questions to ask the guests and we could not go beyond those boundaries. However, I could not do that."

When journalists neglected the unwritten rules, the Taliban would pressure them further. "They told us to support them and their political system in our programs," says Wahdat. "They would tell us that journalists had campaigned against them for 20 years and now it was time to pay them back by supporting them." Eventually, Ariana News executives forced Wahdat to resign, she says.

Nasrin Shirzad, another news anchor and presenter of political programs for Ariana News, says she worked



Afghan American executive and philanthropist Ehsan Bayat (left) with then Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai at the opening ceremony of Bayat Media Center in Kabul on January 21, 2014. (Reuters/Johannes Eisele/Pool)

non-stop on the day Kabul fell. Even before the Taliban took power, Shirzad's work as a political presenter and news anchor had not been easy. Conservatives in her home district in the eastern region of Nangarhar disapproved of her work at a TV station. In her home area, "there is no school for girls," says Shirzad, who was only able to get educated because her parents moved to Kabul. "They don't like girls outside of the home, let alone on TV."

Shirzad told CPJ that about a month before the Taliban takeover, police discovered an explosive device planted near her apartment building. Her neighbors blamed her for endangering them because her high profile had made her a target. A day after the fall of Kabul, Shirzad says, members of the Taliban started pressuring Ariana News to fire her. At least some of the Taliban involved were relatives from her home area. Hassanyar recalls that threats were delivered to him as well as Shirzad's brother.

On August 21, Shirzad said, Ariana managers told her that her life was in danger and that she should stop

working for the TV station. Hassanyar confirmed her account, saying that around that time he received a call from someone who identified himself as a distant relative of Shirzad. "They told me that she is not allowed to be on air anymore," recalls Hassanyar. "They threatened me that if she continues to work at the TV station, they will do anything they want to her and will find me and do anything to me. Shirzad came to me and was crying, asking what she should do. I told her that nothing is more valuable than her own life ... I didn't fire her, but unfortunately she was compelled to leave work."

Male presenters could still appear on air, but faced censorship. Bizhan Aryan, a news anchor and host of political shows, told CPJ that in a live broadcast on the evening of August 16, he challenged a Taliban spokesman about their policies requiring men to wear beards and women to fully cover their heads and bodies. Ariana News executives later reprimanded him for discussing controversial issues and being contentious toward the Taliban spokesperson.

Later, according to Aryan, that part of the interview was removed from the station's online archive.

Aryan continued to challenge Taliban spokespeople, however. When the head of Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency visited Kabul shortly after the fall of the country to the Taliban, Aryan interviewed Inamullah Samangani, a Taliban spokesperson. He asked him why the Taliban were dealing with Pakistani intelligence and not the foreign minister or some other civilian representative. Aryan then pressed him further about the visit—about Pakistan's aims for Afghanistan, and about whether Pakistan had caused a delay in the Taliban's announcement of a cabinet. "That show became more problematic as the managers asked me why I posed such challenging questions to him," Aryan told CPJ. "They told me that if I continued to pressure the Taliban, they would have no option but to fire me."

Aryan continued to work for Ariana News until the end of September 2021, after which, he says, he was forced to take leave and then was informed he'd been laid off. After that, he told CPJ, the Taliban continued to harass him by telephone and maintained surveillance of his home, until he fled Afghanistan in March 2022.

HARD CHOICES

Ariana's managers were also subject to pressure.

Hamid Siddiqui took charge of Ariana News in September 2021 after Hassanyar left the network. "Several times during my tenure as the manager of Ariana News, the Taliban intelligence agency summoned me to GDI headquarters," recalls Siddiqui, who lasted less than a month in the job. "I tried to refuse, but they threatened to detain me if I didn't show up. The intelligence operatives there told me not to allow female presenters at the station anymore. I said, 'I can't accept that,' but the then-chief of Taliban intelligence for media affairs, Mashal Afghan, slapped me and told me to shut up and listen to him." (CPJ attempted to reach Afghan for comment, but was not able to get a response.)

Siddiqui says he asked the intelligence officer why he was acting so rudely. For that, he was detained for three hours, "during which time they beat me up, insulted me and hit me on the head and back many times with their rifles... That same night, the human resources department of Ariana News fired me."

Another manager took over, but he lasted just 25 days before fleeing to Germany. In mid-October 2021, Asghari

became the fourth head of Ariana News in two months. Asghari is a Shiite Muslim and belongs to the Ghezelbash minority ethnic group. The Sunni Taliban labeled him a [Hazara](#)—the largest Shiite ethnic group in Afghanistan—and hurled insults at him.

Asghari told CPJ that during his tenure at the helm of Ariana News' daily operations from October 2021 to May 2022, he was summoned more than 10 times to the Taliban's intelligence headquarters, where he was questioned about Ariana News and its programs. He says the Taliban had recruited a large number of people—perhaps around 200—to monitor and track Afghan media, an estimate based largely on his visits to the media affairs department of the GDI, led at the time by Jawad Sargar.

Asghari says that at the beginning of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, GDI operatives were mainly focused on pressuring the TV station on what they considered major issues, like the appearance of female presenters or the broadcasting of soap operas. But in the last few months of Asghari's work, Sargar would micromanage even small matters, showing up at the station to warn that if he did something the Taliban didn't like, they would arrest, detain, or possibly even kill him. (In response to CPJ requests for comment on this and other accusations, Sargar left CPJ a voicemail saying this was "totally wrong," and promising to discuss it further. He did not respond, however, to several attempts to reach him again.)

"For example, they would come and tell us to change quotes," says Asghari. "Nowhere in the world is it acceptable to change verbatim quotes... If we would quote U.S. Special Representative [for Afghanistan] Tom West as saying the 'Taliban group' in a news piece, Sargar would come and threaten and intimidate us as to why we used the term 'Taliban group,' and then he would order us to change the quote and write 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' instead."

Sargar would enter Ariana News offices whenever he wanted, and visit all departments of the TV station without notice. He would summon a journalist to a meeting room and order him to take out his phone and other belongings and put them on the table to make sure the meeting was not recorded, Asghari says.

Sargar would never call Asghari by his name. Instead, says Asghari, he'd say, "Hey Hazara," and when Asghari would argue against censorship, Sargar would jokingly threaten, saying "Hey Hazara, I will kill you one day," or "You're a Shiite and shaking hands with you is *haram* (forbidden)."

Sargar summoned Asghari on March 12, 2022, to the



Former Ariana News head Sharif Hassanyar, pictured here in Kabul on March 12, 2013. (AFP/Shah Marai)

GDI headquarters where another intelligence operative interrogated him about Ariana’s coverage of the [National Resistance Front](#) (NRF), an anti-Taliban group. Asghari says his interrogator handcuffed him during the three-hour questioning session, and also sought information about his family members’ past and present jobs and if they were engaged with the NRF.

In a WhatsApp message sent to Asghari on March 18, 2022, reviewed by CPJ, Sargar asked Asghari not to publish anything about meetings between intelligence officers and the media. TOLONews had just broadcast a report that the intelligence agency had asked it to stop airing soap operas, and the Taliban had detained three of its employees. “During the few days we had meetings with media officials, it was a condition that no one could leak these issues,” the message reads, referring to the order to stop showing soap operas. “But TOLONews rebelled. Our controversy arose. We hope that there will be a blackout on such issues and no one would publish the news. Even [news] of the arrest

of TOLO officials,” the message reads.

On April 22, 2022, Asghari was walking in the [Karte Seh area of Kabul](#) when a Taliban vehicle approached with four armed men. They jumped out and beat him severely with a bicycle lock, he says, calling him a “spy journalist” and an infidel. He suffered head injuries as a result. Asghari decided that he could no longer stay in Afghanistan and fled to another country shortly afterward. He says he still feels unsafe there.

Other Afghan journalists and media executives face similarly hard choices. Keeping the country’s journalistic flame alive can mean bowing to the dictates of the Taliban; leaving the business invariably comes at the price of leaving homes, families, livelihoods, and professions.

For media owners, the financial stakes can also be high.

Bayat, for instance, has large investments in Afghanistan’s telecoms, power, and energy industries in addition to his Ariana properties. His Bayat Group [employs](#) more than 10,000 Afghans. Three former Ariana News

employees, who did not want to be named, told CPJ they believe that Bayat has censored his television networks since the Taliban takeover because he doesn't want controversies to threaten the operations of his [Afghan Wireless \(AWCC\)](#), [Bayat Power](#), and [Bayat Energy](#) companies.

ATN's Durrani did not respond to CPJ's request for comment on these former employees' views. In his statement to CPJ, he pledged that Ariana would continue to broadcast while ensuring that the safety and well-being of its staff was always its highest priority. "Despite the country's economic challenges ATN remains on air and will stay on air for generations ahead," he said.

The Ariana insiders who spoke to CPJ are less optimistic. Asghari says he was told by former colleagues that Ariana News' revenues, including paid advertising from AWCC, now cover only about 35% of its expenses, with the rest paid by Bayat.

They also told CPJ that the total number of ATN and Ariana News employees in television, radio, and online has plummeted from roughly 400 people in 2018 to about 60 in 2022. Radio Ariana and Ariana News FM stopped broadcasting six months ago. Ariana News employees,

including its online division, now number about 18 people, with only one female employee.

Another challenge for ATN: the struggle to fill the programming void left by the Taliban ban on soap operas and other entertainment programs. According to Hassanyar and Asghari, ATN and Ariana News still operate as two separate stations, but share their content, with ATN heavily reliant on coverage by Ariana News. The former managers fear that the pressure of increasing censorship, threats, and financial constraints might soon force Ariana News to stop broadcasting altogether—leaving ATN a shell of its former self.

For them and many other Afghan journalists, the Taliban's ongoing insistence that [they support the media](#) "within our cultural frameworks" rings particularly hollow. ♦

Waliullah Rahmani is an Asia researcher at the Committee to Protect Journalists. From 2016 to the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021, he was founder and director of Khabarnama Media, one of the first digital media organizations in Afghanistan.

Keeping hope alive

Afghan journalists in exile continue reporting despite an uncertain future

By Sonali Dhawan and Waliullah Rahmani

“I lost my family, my job, my identity, and my country,” Afghan journalist Anisa Shaheed told CPJ in a phone interview. A former Kabul-based reporter for TOLONews, Afghanistan’s largest local broadcaster, Shaheed is one of hundreds of journalists who fled Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021, fearing she would face retaliation for her work.

Despite everything she left behind, Shaheed remains confident that her credibility among millions of Afghans remains intact—and should be put to use. From exile in the United States, she continues to produce critical [reporting](#) on Afghanistan for the Independent Farsi news site, focusing on her home province of Panjshir, a historical [stronghold of Afghan resistance](#) to the Taliban.

Shaheed became a journalist during Afghanistan’s “[media revolution](#),” which followed the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001. During that time, the United States and its allies invested heavily in Afghan media development—the United States alone donated more than \$150 million [by one estimate](#). Foreign governments also provided crucial political support, leaning on successive Afghan governments to allow for a relatively high degree of free expression. The result was “one of the most vibrant media industries in the region,” writes [journalist Samiullah Mahdi](#) in a 2021 paper for the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy.

That once-thriving Afghan media now faces widespread censorship and intimidation under the Taliban. Journalists who remain in Afghanistan have faced [imprisonment](#), [alleged torture](#), [beatings](#), and [threats](#). (Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid did not respond to CPJ’s request for comment sent via messaging app.) Women journalists have largely [disappeared](#) from the media, particularly outside of urban areas, and in May 2022, the Taliban [ordered](#) female broadcast reporters to cover their faces on air, reflecting their [aim](#) to remove women from public life.

‘WE DO NOT FEEL DISCONNECTED’

While local reporters in Afghanistan struggle under immense pressure, many exile journalists are working to continue the journalism they were once able to pursue at home. “What is left out of 20 years of investment and sacrifice in the [Afghan] media is the power of freedom of speech,” says Harun Najafizada, director of the U.K.-based Afghanistan International, the first international news broadcaster focused entirely on Afghanistan. “That is enshrined in the exiled media.”

Launched on August 15, 2021, the day that Kabul fell to the Taliban, Afghanistan International broadcasts and streams Dari-language radio and television programs to Afghanistan and around the world. Najafizada and his partners were able to get it up and running so quickly, he says, because they’d been seeking funding for years prior to the Taliban takeover, and increasingly pushed financiers as each province fell to the group in early August 2021. It is now funded by British-based [Volant Media](#), which also manages Iran International and reportedly has [ties to Saudi Arabia](#). (Najafizada told CPJ that Afghanistan International is not linked to any government.)

Afghanistan International’s 80 media workers are primarily former employees of prominent Afghan news organizations who fled following the Taliban takeover. Despite the thousands of miles that separate them from their country, they’re able to produce reporting on life under the Taliban by relying on extensive networks of contacts they still have within the country. “We do not feel disconnected from Afghanistan,” Najafizada says.

The staff’s high profile and credibility allowed the broadcaster to quickly gain strong engagement numbers on [social media](#), Najafizada says. Although the Taliban [banned](#) local stations from re-broadcasting programs from the BBC, Voice of America, and Deutsche Welle in



Afghan journalist Anisa Shaheed fled Afghanistan shortly after the Taliban takeover. She continues to report from the United States. (Photo courtesy Anisa Shaheed)

March, Najafizada does not fear that his outlet will be cut off. “They would have to ban the digital era,” he says.

Still, internet access remains sparse in many areas of Afghanistan. According to [one estimate](#), Afghanistan had 9.23 million internet users at the start of 2022, including 4.15 million social media users, out of a total population of more than 40 million. As relatively small as those numbers may be, they soared during the two decades following the fall of the first Taliban regime. In 2001, the Taliban-led government [banned](#) the internet to curb the spread of information and images that were “obscene, immoral and against Islam,” thereby cutting off Afghans from the outside world.

Now the Taliban itself uses the internet to amplify its messages on social media. Yet Namrata Maheshwari, Asia Pacific Policy Counsel at the digital rights organization Access Now, says her organization has received reports that the Taliban continues to implement internet shut-downs in certain regions to stifle protest and resistance. “Connectivity will also be impacted by the [destruction](#) of

telecommunications towers [before the Taliban takeover], and the Taliban’s financial and technical ability to keep the internet running,” Maheshwari told CPJ via email.

A STRUGGLE FOR INFORMATION

The internet is necessary not only to send information into Afghanistan, but also to get information out. Journalists in exile depend heavily on sources inside Afghanistan for fresh information about what’s happening on the ground. Covering Panjshir, where the Taliban has a [history](#) of cutting phone and internet access, is particularly difficult when faced with such communications barriers, Shaheed says.

Sources for exile journalists include former colleagues who remained behind after the Taliban takeover, some of whom now find it unsafe to openly continue their work. Still, they are loyal to the profession and want to assist the flow of reliable information, says Bushra Seddique, an editorial fellow at The Atlantic magazine and former reporter

for local newspapers in Afghanistan. From 2016 to 2019, Seddique studied journalism at Kabul University, where she began to establish her own network of contacts. She says journalism was a popular specialization: in 2021, 309 students [graduated](#) from the school's journalism program.

As a precautionary measure, Seddique asks her journalist colleagues to delete evidence of their communications. "If [the] Taliban checks your phone and sees you are connected with a journalist in the U.S., it can be dangerous," she says.

Other avenues of information often are closed off to exile journalists—or anyone else. In 2018, the previous Afghan government [established](#) the Access to Information Commission, which created a mechanism for anyone to request public information. Zahra Mousavi, head of the Access to Information Commission from its inception until the Taliban takeover, told CPJ that while it's encouraging that the commission has not yet been dissolved, its offices remain closed to the public and the media, and its [website](#) is inaccessible. Like Mousavi, other former members of the commission have fled Afghanistan since the

Taliban takeover, she told CPJ via messaging app.

The country's [Access to Information Law](#), approved under the previous government, "is no longer valued or implemented by the Taliban," Mousavi said. While the commission might eventually continue its operations as an independent directorate or under the Ministry of Information and Culture, it will not have sufficient funds to operate, she added.

More generally, the Taliban has escalated efforts to curb and censor any information that challenges its narrative of peace, stability, and security across the country. Shafi Karimi, an Afghan freelance journalist now in exile in France, told CPJ that Taliban spokesmen, for instance, had declined to provide information about the number of children who lost their lives during the past [harsh winter](#). Ali Sher Shahir, an Afghan journalist currently living in exile in Germany, says that when an explosion [struck](#) a high school in a mostly Shia Hazara neighborhood of western Kabul in April, the Taliban refused to provide any information about the blast or the victims. Taliban spokesmen "call us puppet journalists," says Shahir. "They accuse



Freelance Afghan journalist Shafi Karimi now lives in exile in France. (Photo courtesy Shafi Karimi)



Journalists work at the Afghanistan International newsroom in London. (Photo courtesy Afghanistan International)

us of working for the interests of specific countries and of creating propaganda against them.”

Exile journalists who spoke to CPJ agreed that the rise of citizen journalism has helped them counter the Taliban’s restriction on the free flow of information, particularly on social media platforms. “We have received many messages from people in Afghanistan. They want to report with us,” Zahra Joya, chief editor and founder of the women-focused news website Rukhshana Media, told CPJ via video call from a hotel in central London, where she is lodged with 400 other Afghans. Joya, along with other journalists who spoke to CPJ, believes that challenging extensive [misinformation and disinformation](#)—from both inside and outside of Afghanistan—is a large part of her mission now.

STILL AT RISK

While hundreds of Afghan journalists are living in exile, reporting remains a privilege: Only a small fraction have

been able to continue their work from abroad. Afghanistan International is privately funded, while Rukhshana relies on private donations it received through crowdfunding following Kabul’s fall (some journalists there are volunteers).

Karimi, along with three other journalists in France, has spent the last several months trying to raise funds to establish the Afghan Journalists in Exile Network (AJEN), which seeks to cover human rights, women’s rights, and press-freedom issues—topics that are heavily censored within Afghanistan. In addition to supporting journalists who remain in Afghanistan, AJEN would seek to provide opportunities for those who fled their homeland. Exile Afghan journalists in Pakistan, for example, are in urgent need of financial, psychological, and professional support, according to a May 2022 [report](#) by Freedom Network, a press freedom group in Pakistan.

One such journalist—who currently goes by the pseudonym Ahmed—told CPJ that he fled to Pakistan in the fall of 2021 after facing numerous threats and a physical attack from one Taliban member. The attacker recognized him

due to his previous reporting, Ahmed says, and beat and chased him while he was taking his sick baby to a clinic shortly after the takeover. Previously, Ahmed had covered the Afghan war for a local broadcaster, as well as for several U.S. government-funded media projects and foreign publications. As Ahmed awaits approval for a [special immigrant visa](#) to the United States, a process that will likely take [years](#), he feels it's unsafe to work as a freelancer in Pakistan. He gets a small, unstable income from assisting foreign reporters conduct short interviews and other research for their reports.

Since August 2021, CPJ has placed Ahmed's name on numerous evacuation lists of high-risk Afghan journalists shared with foreign countries and regional bodies, but without result. Meanwhile, his family lives with other Afghan refugees in a small rented house, which loses electricity roughly five hours a day. Private education is too expensive for his children, who [cannot](#) attend local government schools. They stay at home instead.

Ahmed's difficulties echo those of other Afghan journalists struggling to start lives in new countries. The Freedom Network's ["Lives in Limbo"](#) report on Afghan journalists in Pakistan found that 63% of respondents, the majority of them experienced journalists, felt they did not have adequate skills to continue working in the profession outside their home country. Most said they had problems with finances, housing, and healthcare. Many have sought assistance from CPJ, saying they cannot get jobs because they don't have work authorization. Those in neighboring Pakistan have told CPJ they still feel at risk from the

Taliban because of their work in the media.

Those journalists who have resettled in the West and continue reporting also face their own set of challenges. They fear Taliban retaliation against not only their sources, but also their family members who remain in Afghanistan. While journalists who spoke to CPJ said that they had not yet observed a case of retaliation against a family member, the perceived threat still looms.

Shaheed, for example, says she wakes up nightly to check WhatsApp, fearing that family members left behind will be harmed in retaliation for her reporting on alleged Taliban [atrocities](#) in Panjshir. She also mourns her previous life as a broadcast journalist in Afghanistan, where her reporting impacted a population with a [high level of illiteracy](#). "People would knock on the doors of Moby Group [the company that owns TOLONews] asking to speak only with me," she said. Now she's 7,000 miles away, and the only way they can reach her is through cyberspace. ♦

Sonali Dhawan is an Asia researcher at CPJ. Previously, she served as a program officer with the American Bar Association Center for Human Rights and worked with Save the Children, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International USA.

Waliullah Rahmani is an Asia researcher at the CPJ. From 2016 to the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021, he was founder and director of Khabarnama Media, one of the first digital media organizations in Afghanistan.

'I thought about the efforts and struggles of two decades... and cried'

The founder of a news agency dedicated to covering the lives and concerns of Afghan women on how female journalists are still reporting the news

By Zahra Joya

In November 2020, I decided to create an Afghan news agency run by and for women—an [online news service](#) that would counter the prevailing patriarchal norms of Afghanistan. The news agency was named after a young woman, [Rukhshana](#), who in 2015 was stoned to death by the Taliban in Ghor province for fleeing a forced marriage.

At the time we started, I was also working as deputy director of media and public awareness for the Kabul municipality, and I was spending much of my salary—the equivalent of about \$1,000 a month—to employ three other female journalists. Some of my friends worked voluntarily, bringing our full staff to six.

Our reporters were mostly untrained, but they knew the struggles of their own lives and could report with empathy about other women. They covered many previously uncovered or undercovered issues, from the street harassment that a majority of Afghan women face to the [experience of menstruation](#). In Afghanistan, particularly in remote areas, many teenage girls are unaware of menstruation before it happens to them, and when suddenly experiencing it, they feel stressed and sometimes go into nervous shock. Menstruation was like a taboo, and we wanted to help normalize it.

We also interviewed girls and women who had been raped, including the particularly upsetting case of a nine-year-old child. Other media reported that the rape had occurred in March last year, but we searched out the family [and reported the details of what happened](#). The child lost a lot of blood in the assault and had to be taken to a hospital to undergo surgery. An aunt of the young girl, who was raising her at the request of the child's father, told us

that after the assault, neighbors and others looked on her family with contempt. The aunt said they did not know where to "take refuge."

GENDER APARTHEID

That kind of reporting is now at risk. Like so many other Afghans, I never imagined that the Taliban would retake Afghanistan so quickly, and that my family and Rukhshana Media's team of journalists would be forced into hiding or exile. Yet on August 15, 2021, we all faced an excruciating dilemma. Under the Taliban, we believed women would have only two choices: You either accept their oppressive laws and live by them, totally changing your identity, or you live as you did and risk getting killed. As someone who struggled hard to get where I am, both options were unacceptable. I couldn't accept having to see the world through the prison bars of a burqa, nor did I want to die. So when I received a call from the British embassy on August 24 giving me a chance to board a flight out, I took it.

For almost a year now, other Afghan women have been waking up each morning to the bitter reality that they live under a gender apartheid regime. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has been eliminated, and the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has taken over its offices. Millions of teenage girls have been hoping to return to their schools, but the [Taliban keep prevaricating and delaying](#). Rukhshana has reported that [violence against women](#) at home and in public is on the rise, with bodies turning up on the streets like discarded



Rukhshana founder news agency founder Zahra Joya, pictured here in London. (Photo courtesy Zahra Joya)

waste. Afghan women who enjoyed certain political, social, and career freedoms a year ago now must often stifle their ambitions.

“Women and girls in particular have been subjected to severe restrictions on their human rights,” says a [recent United Nations report](#), “resulting in their exclusion from most aspects of everyday and public life.”

Female journalists face particular challenges, including intimidation, lack of access to information, and severe discrimination. Surveys vary, but those that have been conducted during the past year show that most women journalists have lost their jobs since the Taliban takeover. In some provinces of Afghanistan, [women are not allowed to work](#) at all.

According to our reporting, the Taliban have banned the broadcast of [women’s voices](#) in some areas, as well as the broadcast of [movies with female actors](#). Media outlets have been instructed to separate the offices of men and women, to prevent them from working together directly.

In March this year, the Taliban banned private news channels in Afghanistan from rebroadcasting programs of the [BBC, VOA, and Deutsche Welle](#), reportedly because of the way their news presenters [dressed](#). In May, [the Taliban ordered](#) all female TV presenters to cover their faces. In some places, it has also banned female journalists from attending its press conferences.

When the Taliban forced female presenters to wear the hijab, I edited the news with a heavy heart. To me, it meant that a form of social imprisonment was being reimposed. At about six o’clock that evening, I turned off the computer in my room here in London, far from Afghanistan, and for a moment I thought about the efforts and struggles of two decades—especially the struggles of Afghan women—and cried.

Despite all these restrictions, however, female journalists continue to work. A female presenter for a private television station told me she finds it challenging to wear a mask while working on-air—she can’t breathe properly

and has difficulty pronouncing her words clearly—but added that she won't give up doing on-air work. Some female reporters, meanwhile, have taken on male aliases, to better hide their identity and protect themselves.

OUR FIRST MALE REPORTER

After the Taliban takeover, Rukhshana remained committed to providing opportunities to female journalists. But fear prevailed, and we had difficulty recruiting—particularly in the provinces and outside the main cities. So almost two months after the Taliban took power, we hired our first male reporter. Since then, we've enlisted others who share our commitment to telling the stories of women.

Together, our female and male reporters, often working covertly, aim to report for their fellow Afghans but also for audiences around the world, so they too can know what the people of Afghanistan are going through in the current crisis. We publish in both Dari and [English](#), and use social platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,

and Telegram to disseminate our news reports and video.

All of our reporters in Afghanistan write under pseudonyms and have very little access to official information. Still, they try. In February this year, a reporter who goes by the name Nasiba Arefi called a Taliban spokesman for the police in western Herat to ask about [two dead bodies](#) that had been hung from the shovel of a giant backhoe. Instead of answering her questions, the spokesman made demands: First, he said the media outlet where she worked had to pledge to operate according to Taliban policies. Second, she should send any reporting to him for review before publication, and she should never use the term “Taliban group” (which is regarded as a term used by the Taliban's enemies to delegitimize its rule).

Rukhshana published the story with the information we had. The Taliban official later texted Arefi, asking her to provide him with the address and details of the media outlet where she worked. She declined, fearful that she could be arrested or harassed.

We always have to tread carefully. In order to ensure the safety of our interviewees and reporters, we sometimes



A women's rights protest outside the Arg Presidential Office in Kabul, on October 21, 2021. (AAMAJ News Agency/via Reuters)

decline to publish sensitive stories. Once, we deleted a story from our website and social media accounts because I'd received a call from a man saying that if we didn't delete it, "we will find your reporter."

'I WILL NEVER GIVE UP'

The remaining female journalists in Afghanistan have one thing in common: They love their work, and feel it is more vital than ever. "I love journalism and I will never give up," one Rukhshana journalist told me. Still, there are times when female reporters question themselves. A woman journalist for a television station in Kabul recently told Rukhshana that she can spend days trying to get comment or information from Taliban officials—without result. "This situation makes me more discouraged from working as a journalist every day," she says.

Journalists also face financial stress. I started Rukhshana with the hope that when other media outlets realized the importance of our work, they might support us financially. But we did not receive that sort of backing, at least initially. Now that so many Afghan media organizations are shrinking or collapsing, such support is more important than ever, and even harder to get.

Still, we've been very fortunate. Last year, a friend conducted a fundraising drive in Canada that brought in enough money to cover our operations for nearly a year, and more recently we received funding from [Internews](#). We now have four full-time editors, seven staff reporters, and several freelancers who work for us regularly. We're not exactly booming, but we're far from folding. Too many women are rooting for us. ♦

Zahra Joya is the founder of Rukhshana Media

Courageous journalism is happening in Afghanistan. We can help.

By Kathy Gannon

Journalism in today's Afghanistan is certainly wounded, but it's far from dead. The evidence is produced daily, even hourly:

- At a Kabul [press conference](#) given by ex-President Hamid Karzai in February, the room was full of journalists. At least 12 TV cameras and multimedia reporters jockeyed for position at the back of the room to record the former president's tongue-lashing of the U.S. administration after it took \$3.5 billion dollars in Afghan foreign reserves and gave it to victims of the 9/11 attacks on the United States.
- When a [powerful earthquake](#) rumbled through Afghanistan's eastern Paktika province in June, killing more than 1,000 people—destroying houses, families, entire villages—Afghan [TV cameras were there](#), sending images and information to viewers nationwide.
- Also in June, [Kelly Clements](#), the deputy high commissioner for the U.N. Refugee Agency, was in Afghanistan. I counted at least nine microphones pressing toward her. All but one or two belonged to [Afghan news organizations](#).
- In July, Afghan media reported on a conference of religious scholars in eastern Afghanistan [demanding education](#) for all girls, as well as events such as [a visit](#) of Pakistani clerics to Afghanistan seeking Taliban help to find a peaceful end to an [insurgency](#) being waged by Pakistani Taliban in Pakistan's border regions from bases in Afghanistan.

This is not journalism as it was before the Taliban took power last August, but it is journalism. It demands our respect and support. Sounding the death knell on journalism in Afghanistan is an insult to those tenacious Afghans who continue to report, edit, and broadcast under difficult

conditions.

In my three decades working in Afghanistan, [I've witnessed a lot of horrors](#)—many of them committed by members of the previous, U.S.-allied administration. Associated militias of that administration carried out [massacres](#) when they ruled from 1992 to 1996. Their internecine fighting killed as many as [50,000 people](#), mostly civilians. I saw the bodies of women who were raped and scalped, and some of the thousands of children killed or maimed by booby traps left by warring mujahedeen groups. Yet the international community not only engaged with them, it partnered with them.

Today's reality is that the Taliban are in power, ruling over a deeply conservative country and governed by strict tribal traditions that for centuries have given women little to no freedom. Still, the Taliban has a Ministry of Information and Culture and some strong voices in leadership who seem ready to engage. (Even before the Taliban came to power, most journalists had current Deputy Information Minister Zabihullah Mujahid on speed dial.) It's not easy to be a journalist in Afghanistan—worse if you are a woman journalist—but it's not impossible.

Some Taliban leaders, struggling to transition from war to governance, might like to turn back the clock. When they last ruled, from [1996 to 2001](#), the Taliban banned [television](#) and [photography](#), and there was only one government-controlled news agency doing any reporting. Then the country [had just one computer](#), in southern Kandahar, and it was rarely, if ever, turned on. But this is not the Afghanistan of 1996. The internet is part of the fabric of the world now, and Afghans have become accustomed to having access to a significant number of television news channels, newspapers, and radio stations that [did not exist before](#), as well as to social media networks—for all their flaws and falsehoods—that now flourish.

There is also resistance to the Taliban's clampdowns on



Kathy Gannon reports from the basement of The Associated Press house in Kabul, Afghanistan, during a night of heavy bombing on October 26, 2001. (AP Photo/Dimitri Messinis)

freedom now, whereas there was no such resistance when they last ruled. In May, when Taliban spokespeople said women had to [cover their faces](#), even on television, male presenters at Afghanistan's TOLONews all [wore face masks](#) for four days as a protest.

The number of women working at TOLONews is growing. Following the Taliban takeover last August, much of the staff of TOLO TV, which offered entertainment as well as news, fled the country. But TOLONews director Khpalkwak Sapai stayed—and made it his job to hire women when their qualifications matched those of male candidates for the same position. Before the Taliban returned to power, TOLONews had 79 staff positions, of which 11 were for women, and 8 of those were journalists, owner Saad Mohseni told me. Today TOLONews has 78 positions, of which 21 are for women, all as journalists. The staffing is fluid, said Mohseni, but TOLONews has continued to hire women in greater numbers.

This is not to say that journalism is without cost. Sapai and two of his colleagues were [detained](#) in March over a report that the Taliban had banned all broadcasts of foreign drama series. Other journalists have been picked up and [beaten](#) for simply doing their job.

Yet every morning in Afghanistan journalists step out their door unsure what the day will bring, and ready to face it. One afternoon it might be [a new edict](#) curtailing women's freedom, another it's a [thuggish intelligence agency](#)—not unlike many other intelligence agencies around the world—making an arbitrary arrest. On still other days, if the journalist is a woman, she faces harassment for simply being a woman.

Journalists working in many parts of our increasingly polarized and angry world navigate similarly treacherous landscapes. Nevertheless, each day they step out their door. They show up at work and report as they can. They reaffirm each day what it means to be a journalist in a country

ruled by a repressive regime that defines journalism as adherence to one version of the truth.

This is what Afghan journalists also do every day.

Looking back over the 20 years when the Taliban were out of power, the media industry grew at a remarkable pace. The proliferation of television news channels was rapid, and the number of young people who wanted to become journalists was inspiring. But the exodus of journalists that accompanied the collapse of Afghanistan's Western-backed government begs questions about the training that was provided, as well as the extent and quality of support that was developed over those two decades.

The basic principle of journalism is independence, yet in post-2001 Afghanistan, the expansion of the news industry became, to a certain degree, an extension of the U.S.-led coalition's mission. In this way, it was closely tied to both the new government and the international community that helped bring that government to power.

Some journalists were deeply critical of their Western-backed leaders and bravely told of the corruption that

crippled progress, yet they also came to believe, consciously or not, that their survival was inexorably linked to the government's survival—that the job of journalism was possible under some governments and not others.

That view is mistaken. Afghan journalists are now needed more than ever, and they need help *inside* of Afghanistan. Some journalists have been threatened and they have feared for their lives, but the only answer can't be evacuation. You cannot evacuate every woman, every journalist. Evacuation, after all, is not the go-to strategy in any of the many other countries where journalists are under threat. Afghanistan, like other countries, needs journalists to speak truth to power.

It was easy to promote and nurture journalists in Afghanistan when the government and international community wanted journalism to flourish. Hundreds of millions of dollars flowed into the country toward that end. But now money is flowing out and help for journalists in Afghanistan is limited.

So what can be done? When the U.S.-led coalition was



Kathy Gannon speaks with a high-ranking Taliban commander at a border post in Torkham, Afghanistan, on October 24, 2001. (Associated Press/Dmitriy Messins)

overseeing Afghanistan, journalists faced the threat of bombings and targeted killings—and not just by the Taliban. Reporters were outfitted with flak jackets, helmets, and given training in conflict reporting to help mitigate the dangers. Today the threats come from a repressive and rigid Taliban regime, and journalists need to be re-outfitted to mitigate the new dangers.

There are no quick fixes, which we in the West so often want, but we can begin to explore possibilities. Afghan journalists may be able to learn from others who work in similarly perilous situations, for instance. There are reporters the world over who know just how scary it is to work in repressive environments—and also know something about how best to navigate the dangers. They could be recruited and put in touch with journalists in Afghanistan. There would be language barriers, of course, but many talented translators are available, including in Afghanistan. And while circumstances are different the world over, the dangers journalists confront also have similarities. It would be wrong to underestimate the value of simple contact between journalists facing their own sets of troubles.

That's just one form of professional backing. A second approach could involve emotional support. A team of counselors could be made available to provide a friendly ear and a professional voice to offer a different type of

guidance. And these professionals don't need to be outside of the country. Too often we in the West forget we have no monopoly on knowledge and talent. Afghanistan has a vast reservoir of skilled, smart people—some never left their country, not even for studies. Universities in Afghanistan have a proud history and have graduated talented professionals, even during the worst of times. There are doctors, psychologists, and professors who could perhaps work with trauma experts elsewhere, and in turn offer counseling to Afghan journalists when they need it, if they need it.

Lastly, journalism-advocacy groups should go into Afghanistan and establish offices there to better understand the landscape. They should talk to Taliban rulers—engage with them. No good will come from not talking to them.

Even in the best of cases, journalism is not easy. But without it we are hostage to lies. Truth dies, and rulers who seek to distort reality and repress individual freedoms—whoever and wherever they might be—win. ♦

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Recommendations

The Committee to Protect Journalists makes the following recommendations to facilitate media freedom and ensure the safety of journalists in Afghanistan:

TO THE TALIBAN, THE *DE FACTO* AUTHORITIES IN AFGHANISTAN

1. Respect and guarantee the ability of all journalists and media workers to report and produce news freely and independently, without fear of reprisal, in keeping with the Taliban's [public commitments](#) of August 2021.
 - End arbitrary arrest, detention, enforced disappearance, beatings, and torture of journalists and media support workers. Release all arbitrarily detained journalists.
 - Restore the ability of women journalists to work freely, without coercion or discrimination; eliminate the requirement for face coverings during newscasts.
 - Allow journalists, domestic and foreign, to freely enter and leave the country, and to travel and work within Afghanistan without interference.
2. End the involvement of the [General Directorate of Intelligence](#) and the [Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice](#) in developing or enforcing media policy, or intervening in media operations and interfering with the work of journalists.
3. Allow civil institutions, including the Ministry of Information and Culture and the [Media Violation Commission](#), to exercise their authority over the media and thoroughly and impartially investigate complaints of attacks on the press, including arbitrary detentions and acts of violence targeting journalists and media workers.
4. Ensure access to effective remedies and due process for journalists who have been targeted for their work and penalize members of the Taliban engaging in such violations.
5. Continue interaction and engage constructively with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Human Rights Unit to address the situation of journalists in the country.
6. Continue to engage with and facilitate country visits by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, including the ability to meet privately with journalists and news executives.

**CPJ directs these recommendations to the Taliban as the de facto authority of Afghanistan and thereby the duty-bearers of human rights in the country.*

TO ALL GOVERNMENTS

1. Accept Afghan journalists who are seeking emergency relocation and enact [emergency visa programs](#) to create a pathway specifically for at-risk journalists.
2. Streamline resettlement processes and support journalists in exile to continue working as journalists, while collaborating with appropriate agencies to extend humanitarian and technical assistance to journalists who remain in Afghanistan.

3. Use targeted sanctions programs to hold Taliban officials and others accountable for human rights violations against journalists and media workers.
4. Continue to condemn press freedom violations and make clear in any diplomatic engagement with the *de facto* authorities that the free operation of an independent media is essential for Afghanistan's future.
5. Use political and diplomatic influence to press *de facto* Taliban authorities to lift restrictions on the independent media and ensure that journalists are not subjected to [arbitrary detention](#), [torture](#), [beatings](#), and [threats](#).
6. Governments that have adopted "feminist foreign policies," such as Canada, France, Germany, and Sweden, as well as those that are committed to women's rights, should develop and implement a strategy for concerted advocacy against restrictions targeting women journalists and media workers in their ongoing engagement with the *de facto* authorities.
7. Support the continuation of the human rights mandate of U.N. experts including the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and ensure adequate resources are available for human rights monitoring, documentation and accountability efforts, including on issues of press freedom.

TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

1. The U.N. Security Council should reimpose the travel ban originating from a [1988 U.N. sanctions regime](#) on all Taliban leadership involved in human rights violations, including specifically those responsible for attacks on the press.
2. U.N. special rapporteurs should meet with journalists in Afghanistan and those living in exile and include their experiences in any reporting and engagement with the *de facto* authorities.
3. The International Criminal Court (ICC) should pursue investigations into crimes against journalists, as part of its [relaunch of investigations](#) into crimes committed by the Taliban and the Islamic State.
4. The [Media Freedom Coalition](#), a partnership of 52 countries working together to advocate for media freedom and safety of journalists, should suspend Afghanistan's membership in the body and seek meaningful, concrete steps to improve press freedom.



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