

New Taliban Regime Exerting Heavy Toll on Afghan Media

A field-based commentary from Afghanistan showcasing how local journalists and media outlets have been impacted by the return of the Taliban to power.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Wilson Fache – BIC Middle East Consultant

To enter the premises of the TOLONews headquarters located in the heart of Kabul, one must first pass through a security gate and two armoured doors jealously guarded by security personnel. Measures that were put in place after the numerous threats and attacks that the news channel has been subjected to in recent years, which took the life of a reporter and a cameraman. Finally, the iron gate slid open to reveal a Taliban police vehicle parked inside. Yesterday, the insurgents were seen as posing a lethal threat. Today, they are TV guests like any other.

According to a recent report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Afghanistan remains the most dangerous country in the world for reporters, just behind Mexico. While the Taliban takeover of Kabul went off without a fight or any death among journalists, the Afghan media paid a heavy price throughout 2021: a total of six journalists were killed, mostly in attacks claimed by the Taliban or the Islamic State group.¹

¹ Annual report on abuses committed against journalists around the world. Reporters without Borders, December 14th, 2021.

Doing journalism in Afghanistan has always been a perilous exercise. However, the return to power of the Islamist movement on 15 August, after a victory as rapid as it was unexpected, represents an unprecedented challenge for local journalists, who are now forced to work under a regime that is fundamentally hostile to them.

The Brussels International Center travelled to Afghanistan twice, in September and December 2021, to examine what impact the change of regime has had on the local media landscape.

Outlets are trying to adapt to a new reality in which battle-hardened insurgents have become administration officials. "Sometimes we get angry phone calls from the Taliban when they didn't like a story we broadcast," Zirak Faheem, TOLONews news manager, told the BIC.

In the days following the fall of Kabul, the vast majority of the channel's employees fled the country, except for a handful of people, including a member of the management, an anchor, and a cameraman. "Given the circumstances, we didn't know if we would be able to stay on the air, but it was important to try because a black screen at such a critical time could have caused even more panic," one employee who asked to remain anonymous told the BIC.

Journalists at the channel told the BIC that they became conscious about the vocabulary they use in their reports and that they had been instructed by the Islamist group to stop referring to them as "the Taliban" but only as the "Islamic Emirate".

"There are rules to follow, but so far we have not lost our independence and we continue to work on the basis of the freedom we have," insisted Zirak Faheem.

Now guests on the channel's various news programs include Taliban officials and supporters as well as detractors and female activists who are not afraid to criticize the new regime's policies such as the suspension of secondary education for girls.

Women have also joined the channel en masse in recent weeks to replace employees who have fled the country. Perhaps surprisingly, the editorial staff of TOLONews is now composed of more women journalists than before the fall of the Republic and the presentation of the morning show has been entrusted to a female host.

Whether TOLONews can survive under the new Islamic Emirate will be a barometer of the Taliban's tolerance for dissenting views and values.²

The yoke of the Taliban is particularly felt in the provinces where local reporters are regularly threatened, censored, arbitrarily detained, and sometimes beaten.

According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, intelligence officials have made death threats against journalists who had criticized the Taliban and have required reporters to submit all reports for approval before publication. The Taliban have also pressed the media, especially in the provinces, to publish the reports they want and have ordered journalists in some instances to interview them.³

The most shocking and mediatised instance of acts of violence against Afghan journalists happened in early September when Taliban fighters detained and tortured two reporters from Etilaatroz newspaper, Taqi Daryabi, and Nemat Naqdi, who were covering a women protest in Kabul.

"On that day I didn't expect to be tortured because I was doing my job. I was thinking that they (the Taliban) had changed and that we could go to cover the protest without any problem. I got out of the office hopeful, but I came back hopeless," Taqi Daryabi told the BIC.

The 22-year-old journalist left Afghanistan on October 3rd and recently resettled in Maryland in the United States. "There was no way for me to stay and to continue my job. We were not free as before and that made our job meaningless," Daryabi added. "I am not sure that local journalism in Afghanistan will survive for a long time, because no one is there to support it."

The growth of a diverse and dynamic media landscape was one of the few happy consequences of the US-led intervention in the country. Under the first Taliban regime (1996-2001), there were no Afghan media to speak of and only foreign journalists were able to work inside the country.

² "Can Afghanistan's Leading Broadcaster Survive the Taliban?" The New York Times, August 30th, 2021.

³ "Afghanistan: Taliban Crackdown on Media Worsens." Human Rights Watch, November 22nd, 2021.

At the time, the Islamists had banned television and people caught watching TV faced punishment. There was only one radio station, Voice of Sharia, which broadcast propaganda and Islamic programming.⁴

The fall of the regime in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks left the field open for the creation of dozens of radio stations, newspapers, and television channels, many of which benefited from substantial international funding.

But the return of the Taliban twenty years later and the sudden withdrawal of the international community sounded the death knell for many outlets. A survey by RSF and the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA)⁵ shows that 43% of media outlets have had to close and more than 6,400 journalists have lost their jobs since 15 August.

"The main factor is the suspension of foreign funding," Reza Moini, head of the Iran-Afghanistan office at RSF, told the BIC.

As early as August 31, the press freedom organisation sounded the alarm: of the 700 women journalists in Kabul before the return of the Taliban, fewer than 100 were still working. Today, that number has increased slightly, thanks in particular to media outlets like TOLONews which have not hesitated to hire more women despite the circumstances.

"There is no doubt that my family is scared and worried about me. But they also agree with me that if we stop working and appearing on television, then the representation of women in the media will disappear and other girls will not have the courage to go on," 22-year-old Tahmina Usmani, who hosts the morning show, told the BIC.

However, there are still many women who do not dare to return to work, like Lina (a pseudonym), a former host on a channel belonging to the same group as TOLONews, who quit her job on 17 August for fear of reprisals from the Taliban, having already been threatened in the past.

⁴ "Afghanistan's media enters the unknown under Taliban rule". AFP, August 24th, 2021.

⁵ "Since the Taliban takeover, 40% of Afghan media have closed, 80% of women journalists have lost their jobs". RSF, December 20th, 2021.

"I fear that soon we will not see women on TV. I don't believe that one can still work independently in this country, even less so when one is a female journalist," the 26-year-old told the BIC.

Tahmina Usmani, for her part, has developed her own survival techniques. Once her day is over, the host takes care to remove her make-up before leaving the studios and puts on a surgical mask to protect herself from the covid but above all, she says, so that she cannot be recognized on the street. "For security reasons," she explained with a sad smile.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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