

Afghan Journalism – Slowly Dying?

Media and journalism in Afghanistan after 15 August 2021



Foto: Afshin Ismaeli

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After ten months of Taliban rule, the Afghan media landscape has drastically changed. Threats, financial constraints, new harsh rules of conduct, as well as an *institutionalized pre-censorship* have contributed to a dwindling number of outlets and constrained the content of reporting. One of our informants said, “If the situation continues [as now], by next year [2023] there will remain no independent news media in Afghanistan.”

After a 20-year period of media diversity, more than half the media outlets have now closed down. The staff of the remaining ones is drastically reduced. Thousands of journalists have left the country, while others are unemployed or hiding, in fear for their lives. Those remaining in the profession often work with reduced or no pay. Less than 20 percent of the female journalists are active in the country.

A culture of interference and pre-censorship is dominant; this seriously hampers autonomous journalism. The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has replaced the Ministry of Information and Culture as the main political body dealing with the media. Taliban intelligence officers from the GDI (General Directorate of Intelligence) frequently enter newsrooms to check on and threaten journalists and editors who do not abide by their rules.

Individual journalists have been frequently threatened, arrested, kept in detention and beaten, contributing to a culture of fear and the strangling of media outlets.

Lack of access to information is now a major obstacle to reporting, as all stories need to be “verified” by the Taliban before they are published. When they cannot access authorities, journalists have to leave many stories unpublished.

To report on human rights issues, women (and other) protests, minority oppression, the military resistance as well as the activities of Daesh (ISKP) is to court great risk and subsequently these issues have in part become “no-go-areas” for journalists.

Journalistic genres such as opinion, satire and cultural reporting, have almost or totally disappeared. For some of the remaining media, «protocol journalism» has become a safe way of staying alive, while others still try to publish critical news, i.e., news that implicitly or explicitly remain critical of the current power holders. A means of survival is a “hybrid media model”, with staff inside and outside Afghanistan, with some of the most sensitive stories being published from exile.

Team: Project leader: Elisabeth Eide (Professor emerita, OsloMet). Members: Zahir Athari (researcher, University of Oslo), Mahmud Farjami (postdoc guest researcher, author, OsloMet), Mujeeb Khalvatgar (Director of Nai supporting open media in Afghanistan), and Hasina Shirzad (researcher, OsloMet).

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Preface:

This document combines different perspectives by studying Afghan media content over time, and by interviewing central media leaders as well as journalists who still – at great risk – work as reporters inside Afghanistan. We have chosen to cite extensively from all these sources to give a more diverse impression of the conditions for journalists and the actual media output, the results of their work to keep Afghans informed, in a threatening situation. We also build on and discuss existing shorter reports on the situation for journalists and media.

We are very thankful for the support from Free Expression Foundation in Norway for their generous support, enabling us to set aside some time and resources for this endeavour. We also thank Dr. Richard Daly for his excellent proof reading.

Last, but not least, we extend our sincere thanks to all those who have taken time to share their views and experiences with us, be they editors/media leaders, journalists, or other resource persons. With this report we wish to honour all the brave individuals who have struggled to keep journalism alive in Afghanistan, some of them brutally killed in the process, others still at risk, but doing their best.

Elisabeth Eide

Project leader

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Structure:

After an introduction explaining the rationale for and questions raised by this project, we present our methodology and our gathering of material by means of literature review (primarily other reports) content analysis, and by in-depth interviews. In Part 3, we look at the depletion of media in Afghanistan, and the ongoing brain drain affecting the journalist field, while in Part 4 we address the media legislation, as well as the variety of Taliban rules and decrees concerning journalism and media. Part 5 presents a wide range of results and analyses, first and foremost based on interviews with media leaders (in exile) and journalists still working on the ground in Afghanistan. In Part 6 we present analyses of a sample of stories from five selected media outlets, trying to assess the level of (self) censorship and ways of reporting under the new regime. Part 7 briefly treats related areas, such as journalist education and artistic (lack of) freedom; finally, Part 8 contains some conclusions and recommendations.

1. Introduction

After seizing Kabul and replacing the government of the Republic in mid-August 2021, the Taliban announced to the world they would adhere to the principles of freedom of expression. This report has investigated their claim and looked particularly at media realities on the ground, by monitoring journalistic media, as well as interviewing media leaders, journalists and other relevant individuals. A variety of media still publish, unlike during the previous period when the Taliban held power (1996-2001). Then, there was only a radio station “Radio Sharia Ghag” and a stencilled “newspaper”, hardly worthy of the name.¹ Today, the Taliban have some realization that they need media coverage to communicate their priorities. On the other hand, as we observe from multiple sources, they do not agree with principles of press freedom and freedom of expression.

The Afghan media situation changed drastically after the fall of the Taliban on October 7, 2001, with an upsurge of new media outlets, and a new opening for freedom of expression. In 2015 the last modified version of the media law guaranteeing journalistic freedom was in place. In February 2020, the last military forces from “Enduring Freedom” left Afghanistan, after President Trump’s agreement with the Taliban, side-tracking the government in Kabul. This step accelerated a negative development. The Taliban had for several years increased their influence, not least militarily, and were able to seize Kabul on August 15, 2021.

By then, the situation in the country was far from good. A drought had seriously affected agriculture. Food shortages increased, also due to less international aid being available in the country; people have now faced starvation and hunger for months. The international community had shifted its focus of attention. Two events have recently further aggravated this situation: first, the financial relations, where Afghan financial assets have been frozen, and President Biden has suggested that half of 7 billion dollars should be allocated to families of the 9-11 victims, despite the terrorists not being Afghan. Second, the brutal Russian attack on and war against Ukraine, has caused Afghanistan to slide further under the radar of the international community. The UN and other international bodies as well as NGOs are partly operative in the country and try to amend the crisis. However, due to a deteriorating media situation, and the diminishing number of local and foreign reporters in Afghanistan, the world now knows less about the plight of the majority of the Afghan people, who remain in the country.

As we write this, the media law, issued by the previous government, is still being verbally confirmed by Taliban as the valid existing law. However, it remains to be seen to what extent, or if at all, it is respected by central and local leadership. There are disturbing reports from our contacts, as well as international watchdogs, of arrests, beating, harassment of journalists trying to do their job. It seems the Afghan secret police, the NDS (National Directorate of Security), now GDI (General Directorate of Intelligence)², [is taking more direct charge](#) of these attacks on media and journalists.³

Our main concern as media researchers is the development of journalism and press freedom. This has to do with people's democratic rights and a tormented population's right to information. We have thus asked: **How has the situation for journalism, news media and press freedom developed after mid-August 2021?**

To answer this general question, we developed other, concrete questions regarding closures of local-provincial and other media; legislation, including rules of conduct and punishment; how the Afghan news media report (from where and on which topics); women's voices and issues; reports on the treatment of ethnic minorities; news on academics, writers, artists, and the press itself; journalist genres and survival, and journalism education.

The report tries to answer these questions via content studies and interviews with important media actors. It is built on studies of selected media outlets, which have been monitored closely for a period of three months, and to a lesser extent also following this three-month period so as to provide information on recent developments. Yet our assessments have one challenge. We cannot know what is *not there* in the media content, we can only assume that less news than before are being published, due to the restrictive situation from mid-August 2021 onwards.

Twenty years of media diversity

After the fall of Taliban in 2001, the Afghan society faced a veritable upsurge of media outlets. Afghan media blossomed for most of the 20 years period after 2001, with scores of new radio and TV stations, newspapers, and magazines. Still, journalists faced many challenges. News media during the Taliban years of 1996-2001 were very close to zero, and many journalists had gone into exile or found other work. Building a large number of media outlets with limited human resources was one of the new challenges. Journalism faculties resumed their activities, but to a large degree built on old and outdated curricula, while other

institutions, such as NGOs financed shorter training courses, partly led by expats, and mostly financed by external donations. A progressive media law was in place by 2015; this was one of the best in the whole region (Khalvatgar, 2019).⁴

From the outset, a lack of sustainability was perhaps underestimated. The fact that most of the new, growing media received international (much U.S.) development assistance either directly or linked to international corporations, expedited the growth, but created a problem. As Hatef & Cooke, 2020 write, “In the ten years following the collapse of the Taliban, USAID and the Department of State reportedly provided over \$166 million to develop independent media in Afghanistan” (referring to Calderon, 2013, Hatef & Cooke 2020: 116).⁵ This dependency was to a degree eased by advertisement revenue, not only from businesses, but also from UN bodies and NGOs. However, after August 2021, when these two support elements were reduced to a minimum, Afghan media were subject to a major financial crisis, which is still ongoing, and threatens to further silence remaining news outlets.

Among the most important other challenges during the last 20 years, and increasingly so, were the extrajudicial killings of journalists and other media workers. In almost all cases, impunity to prosecution was the rule rather than the exception: The perpetrators were neither found nor brought to justice. However, suspicions as well as accusations were directed against the Taliban, as well as the remaining Al Qaida, local warlords, and the ‘newcomer’ IS. This terrorist organization started establishing itself in Afghanistan under the name ISKP (Islamic State of Khorasan Province) after the fall of their strongholds in Mosul (Iraq) and Raqqa (Syria) in 2017. They have recruited (and still recruit) among discontented Taliban members.

In the period between the Taliban’s fall in 2001 and its takeover in 2021, the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#)⁶ reported 52 journalists killed in Afghanistan. If one adds journalists killed where the motive of killing is not confirmed (where personal feuds might be the explanation), as well as media workers, the number is 76. Since some terrorists have at times targeted *media institutions*, it makes sense to include media workers, since such terrorist attacks do not discriminate. A UNAMA [special report published in February 2021](#), reported on five human rights defenders and six journalists and media workers killed, in the brief period between September 12, 2020 and January 31, 2021, demonstrating the intensity of the situation for free expression prior to the Taliban takeover. Furthermore, UNAMA states that in nine out of ten cases, impunity for such violations was total.⁷

Media watchdogs, such as Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan (Nai SOMA) and Afghan Journalist Safety Committee (AJSC) had long reported on threats from various

terrorists, but also from government officials and other authorities, as well as local warlords. In their recent work, they have faced increasing obstacles, and several staff have gone into exile. In RSF's (Reporters without borders) Press Freedom Index, Afghanistan has for the last ten years fluctuated between being number 118 and 128 among 180 countries monitored, and in both 2020 and 2021, the country was ranked number 128, while it dropped to 156 [in the 2022 report](#).⁸

In 2017, Afghanistan was ranked the third [most dangerous country](#) for journalists after Syria and Mexico, while in 2018 it was ranked *the most* dangerous one. It has steadily featured on a 'top ten' list in this respect.⁹ Thus, to raise critique about the actions of people in power was by no means easy. The gap between law, declarations/promises, and practice was evident also in the "blossoming period", even if it has widened substantially after the changes occurring in mid-August 2021 (see reports from ASJC, CPJ, Nai, RSF).

Who were these journalists who operated and (some) still operate in one of the world's most dangerous countries? A survey published by the Afghanistan chapter of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT) in collaboration with Internews, conducted a short time before August 2021, provides some information. Their survey was about safety problems for women journalists in the country and their exercise of professional autonomy. Their sample included 279 women and 74 men (total 353). More than half the informants (52 per cent) were between 18 and 25 years old, 41 per cent between 25 and 35, while only seven per cent were older than 35. They were well educated, more than two thirds had a BA degree, or (to a lesser extent) an MA degree, still others had studied at colleges, while only 14 per cent had only studied up to grade 12. Being young, it is no surprise that in this sample, almost half the respondents had less than three years of experience. When asked about the greatest threat against female journalists, 26 per cent mentioned anti-government elements, while 47 per cent replied "pressure/strain from government". This survey, albeit with some weaknesses (no doubt caused by the unstable situation) demonstrates that the situation pre-August 2021 was far from good for a large proportion of journalists.

These findings are to a degree confirmed by another survey, conducted in 2017 by three members of our team, based on interviews with 28 Afghan journalists (one fourth being women), although the (smaller) sample was somewhat older and more experienced. They reported that they were less willing to take risks than before, their editors even less willing to do so (Eide et al., 2019). Safety routines were far from always in place in media institutions, and quite a few journalists have not received necessary safety equipment. Almost all reported

of experiencing post-traumatic stress syndrome, some had also experienced physical harm. A vast majority (26 of 28 informants) had received threats, 17 of them physical threats. These Afghan journalists, the research concluded, were caught in a balancing act, facing powerful violent insurgents, oppressive authorities, at times media owners not meeting their needs.¹⁰

2. Methodology and focus

One main focus has been on monitoring a group of *edited, journalistic media* for a period of three months. Due to time and financial constraints this has been a necessary limitation of our study. The selected media are among the most prestigious and popular outlets in Afghanistan: Newspapers *8am* (Hasht-e-Subh), and *Etilaatroz*, *Tolo* TV news, *Ariana* TV, and *Pajhwok* News Agency, the latter providing local channels with round-the-clock news, as well as the state-run media outlet, the RTA.

This means that we have no systematic study of local media, such as local radio stations, nor social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc., although individual project workers have participated and observed debates in these media. Whereas legacy media are subject to draconic measures, it seems that social media so far face fewer restrictions, although there might be serious safety risks linked to individual exposure, as may be seen in a case mentioned below.

The individual project participants have been encouraged to keep a “field diary” based on observations of their assigned media. During the monitoring of the media output, special awareness has been paid to by-line/anchoring and sources quoted (gender, minorities, authorities, opposition), journalist genres, image usage and special topics. Our main period of investigation is three months from 7th September to 7th December 2021.

Our team members have interviewed seven media leaders/executives (two of them from other media outlets than the ones monitored), and an equal number of journalists partly from the same media houses, following semi-structured interview guides. For updates, some of these individuals have been interviewed more than once. The safety of interviewees still working in Afghanistan has been an important concern, and journalists have been granted anonymity.

Within the project, there has been some division of labour concerning issues, such as media closures, women’s situation, talk shows, and the (non) survival of satire. Important links have been saved, and with them salient quotes/excerpts. As mentioned above, in the process, we

have also reached out to other organizations who share our concerns, such as Afghan PEN and Afghan Photographers Association (APA) and included some findings from watchdog and journalist organizations, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), Afghanistan's National Journalists Union (ANJU), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Afghan Journalists Safety Group, Reporters without Borders (RSF), and the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IARWT).

Media monitored

8am (Hasht-e-Subh) was the most widely circulated newspaper in the country. The daily went online only after mid-August 2021. It is independent and non-profit, founded in June 2007 by prominent journalists and human rights defenders. The newspaper has focused on citizen journalism and civic education as well as general human rights. The newspaper supports democratic institutions and processes and human rights and has worked to become the voice of victims in the field of transitional justice. Editor-in chief is Sanjar Sohail. In 2012 8am received the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Award. The newspaper pledges independency and adheres to five principles, recognized as inviolable: human rights, justice, democracy, rule of law, and freedom of expression. Hasht-e-Subh publishes in Dari and English.

Ariana: Ariana Television Network, ATN is the country's second-most popular TV network, with a large geographical spread of audience. It is owned by a telecommunication company, AWCC, and is considered the most conservative outlet among the private TV stations. After August 15, 2021, it has gradually changed its tone and staff as well as the language. During August and September 2021, the station started to broadcast soft news including stories on vaccination and sports, along with soft analyses such as UN promises on helping humanitarian crises. The station language was mainly Dari/Farsi and partly Pashto with some Uzbek and English news bulletins but now the main language seems to be Pashto with no Uzbek news bulletin. The online bulletin of the TV is in Dari and English. ATN, as *Tolo TV*, in addition to their round-the-clock news, aired a wide range of entertainment programs, including music competitions, sports and children's programs. Acting CEO is Shapoor Armaghan.

Etilaat-e-Roz (Etilaatroz, Daily information) is another independent nationwide newspaper, but a small one, which prides itself with publishing investigative reports against corruption and nepotism. In 2020, the newspaper received Transparency International's Anti-corruption award. It has long faced economic problems, but still survives with staff both inside and outside of the country. Campaigners have raised funds to keep it alive. It publishes in Dari and English. Editor-in-Chief is Zaki Daryabi.

Pajhwok News Agency: (*Pajhwok* means *reflection* in both Dari and Pashto). From a small project launched during the Constitutional Loya Jirga (2003), it has grown into the largest independent news agency in Afghanistan. It has headquarters in Kabul, eight regional bureaus and a nationwide network of reporters and correspondents in all provinces. *Pajhwok* delivers a daily output of stories in Pashto, Dari, and English. *Pajhwok* also provides photographs, video footage and audio clips to international wire agencies, television, and radio stations. *Pajhwok* is owned and operated by Afghans, with no political affiliations. Editor-in-Chief is Danish Karokhail.

RTA, the National Radio Television of Afghanistan is the state-controlled broadcasting outlet in the country, managed by the Ministry of Information and Culture. It has a national TV station and a radio station with 33 local offices and production units in the provinces, plus Kabul. Based on the current media law, a board of management determines the overall policy of the station, oversees the budget and performances of the director general. RTA has the largest staff (appr. 1,800), and the best infrastructure. RTA was established in 1925 as the first ever radio station, while TV was established in 1977-78. From the outset, RTA has always been the microphone stand of the government with no sign of independence. It receives the bulk of public advertisements and has a separate budget under the Ministry of Information and Culture. The language of the stations used to be mainly equal Dari and Pashto with Uzbeki and Noorestani programs. According to our monitoring, after August 2021, the main language seems to be Pashto. Director General is Atiqullah Azizi.

Tolo TV: (*Tolo* means Sunrise) is the most popular media outlet in Afghanistan, started in 2004, as part of the Moby group, a transnational media network. Tolo had until recently a wide range of programs. It is a declared independent channel but linked to Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp. After 2001, it became one of the first commercial stations, and offered a wide variety of shows. Tolo was the first channel with entertainment programs that included Indian and Turkish soap operas, music competition and satire, and was the last one to sign the agreement with the Taliban to ban their soap operas (by Lotfullah Najafizada, the previous director of the channel who just received the title journalist of the year 2022 from [One Young World](#)).¹¹ The station, which had more than 650 staff members, in 2020, now has less than a hundred. The station mainly focuses on Dari language while a sister station called Lemar is the Pashto copy of Tolo under the Moby group. The online news website publishes in English, too. Their CEO is Afghan-Australian Saad Mohseni.

Media output focus

The output from the variety of media is still relatively large. Due to the great number of stories – small and large – observed, we had to select items worthy of particular attention and analysis, while overlooking others. Our focus is directed towards special themes/issues, which

we feel call for closer scrutiny, due to their character of controversy or sensitivity under the current leadership in Afghanistan. We concentrated on issues, which, according to our assessment of the situation, would be of particular interest for our estimation of the degree of media freedom/restrictions: Thus, attention was paid to news coverage of areas such as *human rights* reporting, reporting on *protests/opposition, harassment/arrests of free thinkers/civil society activists, women/women rights; education, media rights/restrictions, access to information, culture, and opinion-based items*. To a degree, we also took notice of other areas, seemingly less controversial, such as health, survival (hunger, drought), (non-political) crime, foreign relations, and humanitarian aid.

Together, the team has mastery over the three languages necessary for this endeavour: Dari, Pashto, and English. Several of the main Afghan media outlets also publish in English, however, they had differing practices: In some cases, the more controversial stories might be published in English, and not in the Afghan languages.

Special challenges

There are limits to what our reading of the published media items can accomplish. None of the team members are currently based in Afghanistan, although we all have experiences from living/staying in the country, and/or the region. We are not able to verify all the incidents reported, although in certain cases, we supplement our research by accessing some international/regional media. However, we have no way of knowing in-depth the “story behind the story” for each item. *Our aim was to assess the coverage in terms of what topics media can still report on; to which level critique and choice of sources reveal where lines are drawn; and whether journalistic media can still play a role in fulfilling their fundamental ideals regarding keeping the Afghan public informed*. Despite huge progress during the last two decades, a large portion of the Afghan population remains illiterate. Thus, audio-visual media play a very important role, not least local radio stations, which are (*were*, as the proportion is dwindling) available to almost all.

Events develop and unfold very quickly in a serious conflict situation; and news sites are updated several times a day. We have not been able to capture all these updates but have done daily searches in the monitored period (the three above-mentioned months). Thus, our main analysis is concentrated around these data. However, as we have not stopped following Afghan media, in some cases, we have included issues showing development later than this

period; however not as systematically. This is done to make the report as updated as possible. We have also made some genre searches, to map the state of the art when it comes to opinion pieces, satire, or the coverage of sports, culture, and art.

It has also proven to be difficult to collect accurate information of media closures and number of journalists still on the job, because sources, such as journalist unions and watchdog institutions offer differing numbers, and the changes (depletion of media outlets and the group of professionals) occur week by week, if not day by day. When in doubt, we maintain that numbers are not confirmed, as there is no statistical authority in place to secure accurate information, even if the journalistic and watchdog organizations do their best to follow the situation both on the ground and in exile.

Another challenge has been gaining access to current media actors. After continuous attempts, we were able to secure exclusive in-depth interviews with seven Afghan media leaders (persons of different positions, but mainly editorial, with journalist experiences) of important media outlets. Access was made easier by virtue of their being in exile. In addition, more challenging, we have interviewed an equal number of reporters on the ground, whose safety remains a sensitive issue. We have supplemented our interviews in this respect among others with reports presented by [Human Rights Watch \(HRW\)](#)¹² who interviewed journalists in provinces outside of the capital Kabul, as well as the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ, who released a report with [special emphasis on women journalists](#).

Besides this report from HRW, which appeared in early March 2022, other documentation, both media reportages and reports filed by watchdog organizations, have been published during the last nine months. In general, they are shorter and more focused on one or a few aspects of the situation. We have regarded these as important resources, and when they fit our need for supplementary information as well as our report structure, we refer to them, with ample accreditation.

Our contribution is an attempt to synthesize information from our own work with many different sources and outlets, by combining several methods: media analysis, case studies and interviews, into a broad overview of the situation. All this despite difficulties we faced due to the very special situation (from mid-August 2021), by some interviewees called “the collapse”.

3. Media closures, brain drain and survival

Last time the Taliban were in power (1996-2001), the media situation was different from now. There were no media worthy of being called journalistic. As we write this report, Afghan media institutions still publish news and other reports in/from/about Afghanistan. The technological revolution has rendered next to impossible a step-back to the previous Taliban period's lack of journalism. The challenge now is to what degree (if any) the media can pursue a path of autonomy and independence under an extremely authoritarian regime. This comes in addition to the struggle for financial survival in a situation where Afghanistan, due to other conflicts such as the Russian war against Ukraine, seems to slide under global radar. Financial transactions at the time of writing this, are still a challenge since the banking system does not function.

A large number of media have closed down, causing a sharp deterioration of the situation for journalism and free expression. Others have had to reduce their staff, in many cases drastically.

Many factors work together to create this situation. Afghan media were, to a large extent, dependent on foreign support. External funding to non-humanitarian projects came to a halt after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Thus, many media have been closed due to economic constraints. Other reasons for the drastic reduction of media outlets have to do with a situation of threat leading to censorship and self-censorship, lack of access to information, plus an ongoing exodus of journalists from the country, and indeed from the profession. As one media leader in exile puts it: "there is a lack of experienced staff; there is censorship and self-censorship; limited access to information and a deterioration of security".

Media closures

The numbers of existing and previous media outlets given by different sources of information vary. According to a [survey](#) conducted by IFJ and ANJU across 33 of Afghanistan's provinces¹³, a total of 318 media outlets have closed since the Taliban came to power in August 2021. Only 305 of the 623 media organisations active before the beginning of the Taliban regime are still operating.

More in detail, according to the survey there were 132 TV stations and 293 radio stations in Afghanistan prior to 15th August 2021. In addition, 114 printed publications existed, as well

as 84 pure online publications. Half a year later the number of TV stations was 81, radio stations 161, printed publications 20, and online news publications 43. Except for print, which suffered the most closures, the other media encountered a decline of almost 50 percent. This report does not include estimations of the output *volume* in the remaining media, which has also been reduced, due to a reduced number of staff.

Based on a survey by Nai (SOMA)¹⁴ in the first half of 2021, there were 94 operational TV stations, 196 radio stations and almost 250 print/online outlets across the country. It means prior to government collapse in August 2021, there were around 540 *operational* media outlets in Afghanistan. Based on a Nai SOMA in November 2021, 257 of the 540 outlets were shut down during the three months after the Taliban takeover. If these numbers are correct, almost half the operational media outlets have been closed.

RSF/AIJA (Afghan Independent Journalists Association) reports that at the end of 2021, 231 media outlets had closed. In an [Al-Jazeera report](#) dated October 22, 2021, the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee was quoted as stating that “70 percent of the media outlets across the country have closed in the two months since the Taliban came to power”.¹⁵ According to RSF’s Press [Freedom Index Afghanistan report](#) from 2022, 43 per cent of Afghan media outlets disappeared in the course of three months.

It should be noted that based on information from the Ministry of Information and Culture, in the period from 2002, there were around 150 TV stations, around 320 radio stations and 3000 print outlets. These Ministry statistics indicate the number of *registered* media outlets, not considering whether they were *operational* or not.

All numbers, thus, need to be treated with caution. They are further complicated by the fact that some print outlets are now just online (due to cost reduction), and the remaining TV and radio stations now also have their online outlets. Some media outlets seem currently to be updated only through social media. One example is the Arman-E-Melli daily, which is updated through Facebook. Newspapers *8am* and *Etilaatroz* – still publishing, but only online – are among those who also provide their readers with news content through Facebook and Twitter.

Even if the figures differ, we may safely conclude that the number of media outlets in Afghanistan is drastically reduced, and within the still existing media, the staff is mostly reduced to a minimum, thus aggravating the situation further and narrowing the scope of

reporting. Due to severe economic constraints, it is likely that the number of publishing outlets will further deteriorate.

Local closures

One of the early closures was *Zan TV* (Zan means woman), rendering many journalists jobless. This TV channel started in 2017 and catered especially to woman audiences. It represented a fresh outlet for informing women of their rights. Therefore, they did not have much hope with the new political leaders and [stopped broadcasting on September 17, 2021](#). Except for the male owner, the Zan TV staff were all female. The station was an educational platform for newcomers to the sector. Although Zan TV was established for commercial reasons, they simultaneously promoted women's rights, and were financially supported by its owner. [The owner left the country](#) prior to the collapse of the republic government. This contributed significantly to the closure.¹⁶

Merman Radio in Kandahar, also founded and led by women, has also been forced to shut down, according to the HRW report. This radio [received the RSF award](#) in 2020.¹⁷

Another TV and radio channel by the name of *Baano* (Lady) was shut down after mid-August 2021. Baano (under the Baano Media Group) was established in July 2017 in Kabul city but could be viewed from nearby provinces. The focus of the station was mainly women, but it was not limited to women's issues. In 2018 it started to broadcast from Balkh province and in 2019 was on air through satellite too. The station published in Dari and Uzbeki.

In October 2021, [Tolo News reported](#) that Afghanistan's only sports channel, *3Sport*, disappeared, after having broadcasted for more than ten years. According to their head, Shafiqullah Saleem Poya, the main reason was "the restrictions being imposed on all media and specifically 3Sport [...] The media has been struggling with other problems in the social, economic, and political areas also."¹⁸

A correspondent [from The Guardian](#) met with the owner of *Radio Sanga* in Qandahar in November, who was unsure of whether they could continue, since they claimed to have lost "80% of their 1,5 million listeners" and laid off one third of the journalists, including all the women who worked there. Also gone was the owner's passion for journalism.

"The Taliban asked us to share anything before we broadcast it, so now we just repeat news that has gone out on official stations. Recently I heard about an incident in the city, and I wasn't even interested in sending anyone to check it out", the owner said.¹⁹

This report tells how the journalist morale (inspiration) to continue publishing may be affected by various kinds of interference from outside powers.

In April 2022, according to an [article in Pajhwok News Agency](#), the “Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology (MoTIT) says about 133 media outlets that have failed to renew their frequency licences, owe it 202 million afghanis”.²⁰ These licenses are paid yearly, and media outlets are obliged to renew them when the period expires. The letter also said that the Ministry “can suspend broadcasts of any media outlet whose licence has expired until it is renewed.” Already, approximately 40-50 per cent of the media outlets are closed. Failure to pay the license may accelerate the number of closures further.

Ban on international media

Large international media outlets are also sanctioned by the Taliban regime, [reports the IFJ](#) and its Afghan affiliate ANJU. On the 27th of March 2022, BBC’s news bulletins in Persian, Pashto and Uzbek were taken off air when their local partners were “ordered [by the Taliban] to remove all international broadcasters from Afghanistan’s airwaves.” The same happened to Voice of America, who had broadcasted programs for their Afghan partners *Tolo news* and *Shamshad TV*. Furthermore, also *Deutsche Welle* and the Chinese state-run *China Global Television Network* had to close their programs. As BBC reports: “The crackdown on foreign broadcasters follows the Taliban’s [ban](#) on foreign television programs earlier this month.”²¹ For the media savvy and resourceful ones, there are still ways to get around this via VPN. In addition, those who are well-offs and possess satellite dishes (mainly in cities) may still enjoy some access to international media, according to our sources.

As late as two days ahead of the International Press Freedom Day (3 May), [Ariana published](#) a statement from the UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General, Mette Knudsen, who said that 43 per cent of Afghan media had closed down, and that four of five female journalists were no longer working. “Richard Bennett, UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, in a video message, said that the IEA (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) has ‘promulgated new and restricted guidelines for the media and access to information has become more challenging, impacting negatively on the dissemination of information’.”²²

A brain-drained profession

ANJU (IFJ) writes that prior to August 15, 2021, there were 5,169 journalists in the country, 4,090 male and 979 female. A good number of female students, in big cities, such as the capital Kabul, had entered journalism studies at the universities and other institutions of learning in the past 20 years. More than half a year later, ANJU notes that the number of male journalists is almost halved, to 2,091, while the number of female journalists is reduced to a quarter of the previous number: i.e., 243. At the end of 2021, [RSF with its local partner AIJA](#), stated that more than forty percent of media outlets had disappeared, while 60 per cent of journalists and media employees are no longer in the profession, while the proportion of female journalists was down to 20 per cent of the number before the changes in mid-August.²³ RSF had, however, other figures than ANJU/IFJ. In their Press Freedom Index from 2022, they claim that 10,780 people were working in Afghan newsrooms (8,290 men and 2,490 women) in the beginning of August 2021. But according to RSF, only 4,360 were still working in December (3,950 men and 410 women), or four out of ten journalists. Proportionally, women have suffered much more: more than four out of five (84%) have lost their jobs since the arrival of the Taliban, whereas only one out of two men have (52%). As seen from the above, such figures vary. On 3 October 2021, *Ariana* reported on the National Union of Journalists saying that “70% of journalists have lost their jobs and journalists are afraid of being threatened”. Much later, a new [ANJU survey](#) (based on 500 respondents in all Afghan provinces, published in early March 2022) indicated that 60 per cent of the female journalists in the country had lost their jobs. Most of the informants are the sole breadwinners of their families. A high percentage (79) reported of having been insulted/threatened by the Taliban, while an even higher part (87 per cent) said that they were not motivated to work under the current circumstances.²⁴ We conclude that there are conflicting numbers. Regardless of the different statistics, during the time span of our work for this report, the numbers might be further reduced. These reports demonstrate that journalists who still try to exercise their profession, are caught in a balancing act (as, to some extent, was the fact as well were before August 2021), albeit with other players in central positions and other rules of the game.

The general reduction may be due to media closures, pressure from the current establishment, lack of safety, or reporters being threatened from practicing their profession independently. The more dramatic reduction on the female side, is most likely also due to the strict gender policy of the new regime, the special threat situation and new codes of conduct imposed on women reporters who wish to continue working in the profession, such as dress code,

compulsory *mahram* (male escort), etc. Another factor, which is bound to play a negative role for women in the profession, is family constraints, as many families do not like their daughters to pursue a career in journalism. This is particularly due to the scary situation brought by new regime. Several women protestors and female journalists in Kabul and Balkh provinces have been arrested and jailed for weeks.²⁵ Given this situation, their families may hinder their professional work so as to protect them, but also due to a risk to the entire family, since whole families experience threats when their sisters/wives/daughters continue to work as journalists.

Some reports, among them [RSF in December 2021](#), stated that there are 15 provinces, in which there are no female journalists at all. Prior to August 15, 2021, this was the case in five provinces.²⁶ In conservative environments, this represents a serious constraint to media reporting on women's situation. The result of having no remaining local media, or very few, in addition to tough constraints on reporting, may be that the conditions of people in large areas/districts (oftentimes vulnerable groups) will not be reported. In addition, the reporting in some areas was already weak, with media outlets owned by and under control of local warlords, whose disregard and contempt for independent media was no secret. As one exiled leader states: "Most of the Afghan provinces had at least 10 privately owned media outlets just four months ago, but now some regions have almost no local media at all." (Killid). The above-mentioned constraints are even stronger in the rural areas than in the cities. Thus, many stories from the rural areas remain unreported, a serious situation in a country with a large rural population. Some news will appear in social media, but not with the same legitimacy and authority.

On the other hand, the majority of the Afghan journalists are still in the country, and some of them try their best to get stories across, using advanced safety measures to avoid being harassed or arrested, as reported on February 15, 2022 by the [Global Investigative Journalism Network \(GIJN\)](#).²⁷

When it comes to photojournalism, the political transformation has entailed a drastic shrinking of job opportunities, as may be seen from the poor visual footage of our studied news outlets. In their previous period of government (1996-2001), the Taliban did not allow any photography to be published. It rests to be seen whether the situation will become even more restricted than today when some photos from official meetings – and in some cases protests – may still be observed (more on photojournalism below).

Exiled media workers

The numbers provided by ANJU (of reporters having left the profession) does not correspond to the number of journalists who have left the country, as the latter is likely to be much smaller. Journalists from prestigious media, particularly female journalists, may have had an easier escape from Afghanistan than men working for example in local radio stations. The number of jobless reporters in Afghanistan is hard to estimate exactly. On the other hand, a few options are in place for exiled journalists, such as “Afghanistan International”. Another TV station is in the process of formation, called “Exile TV”. Some journalists report being invited to contribute to local newspapers in their new countries of residence (France, Germany) but most are more actively participating on social media, creating “mini-platforms” for exchanges of news and other information. This means that in smaller ways they function as media outlets, where political and economic discussions are taking place, and thus, to an extent represent ‘alternative local media’.

It is also a fact that most leaders of the largest media outlets have left the country for a safer existence in exile. The levels of threat they faced were substantial, as they were allegedly added to a list of “individuals to be killed” which circulated among militant groups, prior to the Taliban takeover. The list allegedly originated from the Taliban cultural committee and was sent to their military committee, with orders to kill persons on this list. Most of them were media leaders, profiled reporters or civil society activists.

In a sense, some media now operate as “hybrid”, with a proportion of items being produced from abroad, while others (the bulk) are produced by on the ground reporters, who may to a larger extent be subject to (self)censorship (see below). The situation in exile is not equally safe for all exiled media workers, though, as some are living as refugees in Pakistan or Iran, with no jobs and expiring visas.²⁸

4. A constrained profession: legislation and rules of conduct

In analyses of media output, media analysts mostly register *what is there*. On the other hand, in countries where media operate with legal or actual restrictions, it is also important to study what is not (no longer) reported upon, or if any genres disappear. As mentioned above, in relation to genres, the only sports channel is closed, although some media still report on (male) athletes, not least cricket players. Much of the current censorship as well as self-censorship takes place guided by rules and regulations pronounced by the new authorities.

The Taliban have also established a new section in the GDI (formerly NDS) to monitor and control the media. Below is an attempt to summarize the rules which emerged after the Taliban takeover.

A factor aggravating the situation is that the current regime has inherited the biometric registration system previously used by the Americans, both for identity cards and for surveillance. According to Human Rights Watch, “The Taliban have targeted journalists and threatened human rights activists, including women rights activists, women working in roles that the Taliban believe are unsuitable for them” as well as LGBT people. The biometric system now in the hands of the Taliban, represents an extra threat to the groups mentioned above, not least to active reporters.²⁹

Legislation, rules, and decrees

The Taliban have repeatedly stated that they still adhere to the Afghan media law, estimated to be one of the most liberal in the region. However, most of our contacts believe that this cannot be taken seriously, and that it has more to do with the fact that they have still not made a new law (and that they want international recognition), rather than it signaling they actually accept the principles laid down in the existing law. Article 34 of the Constitution:

Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution. Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities. Directives related to the press, radio, and television as well as publications and other mass media shall be regulated by law.

A rather universal feature, albeit with different occurrences around the world, is the discrepancies between law and practice. After August 15th, the new rulers have stressed that *Sharia* is the foundation of law.³⁰ [The constitution](#) adapted under President Karzai also referred to Islam, in the sense that if any of the other laws came in conflict with Islam, Islam had the upper hand: “No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan.” This, which is the essential part of Article 3 in the Constitution, leaves much to interpretation by bodies such as the *Ulema*, and in cases where the Ulema is more liberal, indeed the government.³¹ The following decrees/sets of rules may be seen to represent the Taliban’s way of implementing the laws. Some are also much subject to interpretation.

September 2021: the eleven rules

The first signs came early. The new restrictions especially targeted female journalists. Just a few days after Kabul fell to the Taliban, one Taliban leader, Wahidullah Hashemi, said that women “do not have the right” to be reporters or news anchors; this “is not allowed in our government.”³²

On September 19, 2021, Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi from the GMIC (Government Media and Information Centre) presented 11 rules for journalists, which in some cases are not so different from the previous media law, nor from internationally recognized principles, but in other cases they leave the door wide open for censorship. As [RSF commented](#), the rules are “vaguely worded, dangerous, and liable to be used to persecute them [the journalists]” (RSF 2021).³³

The first rules are close to the (still) existing media law, about not publishing anything at all contrary to Islam, or which insults national figures or violates privacy. Rules 4-6 tell the journalists not to distort news content, respect journalist principles and ensure balanced reporting.

The more controversial, or indeed threatening parts occur in the next set of rules, which decree that matters that “have not been confirmed by officials at the time of broadcasting or publishing should be treated with care”; furthermore, that matters that could have “negative impact on the public’s attitude or affect morale should be handled carefully”; moreover, journalists should adhere to the “principle of neutrality” and “only publish the truth”. While the principle of letting accused parties have the right to response when critique is raised is a universal one, the formula “confirmed by officials” is something wider. In many cases this means that if an event is *not* confirmed, the story may be shelved and never published.

This restriction is partly answered in the remaining two rules (10-11), where GMIC states that it has elaborated a specific form which will make it easier for media to “prepare their reports in accordance with the regulations”, and finally that media outlets must “prepare detailed reports in coordination with the GMIC”.

We know from other reports, that Taliban interference has become the rule affecting most of the remaining media. These early publicized rules legitimize both censorship and pre-censorship, while they are garnished with repetitions of some general universal journalism standards. The truth will emerge from journalistic practice. This also makes it clear that when working our way through the media content of the selected news outlets, we will at times have

to carefully read between the lines, look for subtle ways of non-adherence to the rules, and also keep in mind that we will not be able to know all stories that are *not* (no longer) covered.

November 2021: additional rules

More specific “recommendations” were in the pipeline. At a press conference on November 22, 2021, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (inspired by similar institutions in Saudi Arabia and under the previous Taliban rule 1996-2001) declared new rules for the media to obey, here referred to in the *Pajhwok* minutes from the meeting with officials. Below, we quote the decree in its entirety:

The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice says the media should not broadcast in a way that insults religious rites and human dignity, and that female journalists on television should observe the Islamic hijab.³⁴ Officials of the Ministries of Information and Culture and the vice and virtue met with media representatives in Kabul today. Zabiullah Mujahid, Deputy Minister of Information and Culture, praised the work of the media and called it important for the country. He said the media should take Islamic values into account and work for the national interest. He added that the people of Afghanistan sacrificed four decades in defence of the religion, all the institutions of the country should work within the framework of Sharia and the media should also have Islamic broadcasts and work for the call to religion like the Imam.

Maulvi Mohammad Khalid Hanafi, Minister for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice also said that the government and media should work together to uphold Islamic values.

He called on the media to co-operate with the government on the issue of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil and preventing the negative propaganda of foreigners.

Ahmadullah Wasiq, Deputy Spokesman of the Government, read out the statement of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice on the occasion.

The statement said that *television media should not broadcast films that are against the principles of Sharia and Afghan values. Foreign and domestic films that promote foreign culture and traditions in Afghan society and cause immorality in the society should not be broadcast.*

Comedy and entertainment programs should not be designed in such a way as to insult someone.

Drama that insults religious rites or human dignity should not be allowed to air.

Men's films and videos that expose women should not be released.

Female journalists in television media must observe the Islamic hijab.

Drama and programs that have female actors should not be aired.

Serials that depict the Prophets or Companions and have a pictorial form are strictly prohibited.

This decree explicitly bans some of the most popular media genres in Afghanistan, content which many people had been able to enjoy for most of the past 20 years: musical programs (one prominent example being *Tolo TV*'s "Afghan Star"), dramas, serials, comedies (satire banned), etc. Furthermore, the Taliban ordered TV stations to ban all their foreign soap operas and serials, even those with an Islamic content. Previously during Ramadan, most of the TV stations aired Islamic serials, including an Iranian one, which narrated the history of prophets Joseph and Jacob. This serial was not allowed to be broadcasted during Ramadan 2022.

In 2022

On 2 February 2022, the main Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, met with the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) and according to the media outlet [Salaam Watandar](#) urged "the media to consider national interests, Islamic values and national unity in their publications", and added that the media could continue, provided they respected these interests. Furthermore, he expressed his confidence in the media to follow this appeal, and that a "new media commission would be established to address "any problems, and that the authorities would enforce the former government's media law." He also stated that they had "studied the previous media law, which did not have any shortcomings", and that "women can work freely in the media by observing Islamic and national principles".³⁵

This statement from Mujahid, may be seen as an effort to appease critical journalists as well as the international community, and simultaneously comes from one of the representatives considered somewhat more reasonable than the hardliners, according to informants. On the other hand, the statement leaves much to interpretation; and it remains easy for hardliners – and for local Taliban with no knowledge of the media law – to interpret "national interests, Islamic values and national unity" in their own preferred ways.

We may also conclude that the [Taliban policy announcement](#) on women's dress code, ordering them to cover their face in public (May 7, 2022), will further restrict and discourage female

journalists from doing their job. The last announcement from the Taliban ordered the female presenters who remained on air in Afghanistan [to cover their faces](#) (19 May 2022).

Unwritten rules / policy in practice

Based on a decree by Taliban, all serials on Afghan TV stations are banned, including serials with Islamic content. Even a serial from Iran on the life of Prophet Joseph should be banned on Afghan TV. One media leader commented on this, “Dancing women on TV is an issue, however while the Taliban are angry with such programs, they have secretly watched them”. Women showing skin (international ones) are covered up.

A channel such as *Ariana*, used to report on human rights, for example while Taliban started their operations against the last strongholds of the resistance (for example in Panjshir), and there were claims of many civilian killings. Later, the channel changed its tone and contents. In September 2021, female anchors presented pre-recorded stories while in January 2022, only one female presenter was left. After the detention of two ATN journalists in Kabul early 2022, the number of staff members decreased further. Reports from the ground suggest that the Taliban rules of conduct are practiced in a variety of authoritarian ways. For further details, see below.

Lives lost or disturbed

According to data from Nai/SOMA; from Aug 15, 2021, to March 31, 2022, 36 violent incidents against journalists were registered. These include six assassinations, two injuries (both in 2021), 19 temporary arrests (by the Taliban), eight (three in 2021 and five in 2022) persons were beaten up and one person disappeared (2021). All assassinations so far happened in 2021, while 12 out of 19 temporary arrests happened in 2022. Of the perpetrators, 23 out of 36, have been identified as Taliban and the remaining 13 are unknown. The Taliban regime is also identified as responsible for six of the cases where persons were beaten up. When it comes to assassinations, one has been confirmed as conducted by the Taliban, one by ISKP, while the remaining cases are committed by “unknown gunmen”. These results are the registered and confirmed ones, and might represent a tip of the iceberg, as other (many) cases may pass under the watchdog radar, with their limited resources, particularly in remote provinces.

Almost as a comment to this challenge, an Afghan independent analyst, [Mr. Rahmatullah Amiri](#), says that the Taliban “don’t go for the big fish; they go for the small fish [...] They are very systematically targeting those small fish to close the chapter on freedom of speech.” According to Mr. Amiri, the Taliban believe that if one does not control the community from the grassroots, one can not to control it at the national level. “If you want to make sure there is no future forest, you don’t cut the big trees; you [instead] don’t allow the little trees to grow,” he adds. That strategy has evoked little international outcry and has been used effectively for years to “achieve broader aims,” he says, compared with the “easily noticeable” targeting of higher-profile people.³⁶

5. Editors’ and journalists’ views

For this report, we have interviewed seven media leaders/executives about the situation for their respective, national media, as well as about the general media situation. We have mainly used a joint questionnaire, but we also made space for individual follow-ups. The media leaders, all interviewed in exile, all but one (who has resigned) represent media still functioning. The interviews have been conducted by team members at various points of time, from September 2021 to April 2022. Some of those interviewed early in the process, have been re-interviewed to obtain updated information (see Annex 1). Additionally, we have interviewed six journalists still working on the ground in Afghanistan. They have also been interviewed according to a questionnaire, using safe means of communication, to ensure that they remain anonymous. Since the situation has worsened recently in the period leading up to the release date of this report, some of the editors might seem more optimistic than they would have been, if they had been interviewed in late May 2022.

“For 20 years, we had free media, now we lose day by day. It is not easy to look at. We still operate from Kabul and all provinces. As the local provincial media are weakened, we believe the events there are under-covered”, says one leader (*Pajhwok*). The agency still maintains a strategy of having reporters all over the country. “All reporters are under pressure, and the staff is much reduced from before the collapse”. Other leaders also tell of drastic staff reductions.

Financial constraints, precarious survival

No doubt, as one leader describes, there has been a “radical change in the Afghan media landscape since the return of the Islamic Emirate on August 15[, 2021]”; especially women journalists have been hard affected with four out of five no longer working” (Killid). In *Pajhwok* News Agency, for example, 16 out of 100 staff are now women. Out of the 15 evacuated journalists, ten were women, and it has been “difficult to replace them” (*Pajhwok*). The local and provincial closures of media have badly affected some Kabul-based media, who relied on partner organizations and/or subscriptions. Also, some media relied on co-operation with NGOs for their survival, an option which is now less or no longer available.

The development, with weekly news of closures, is such that the Taliban who do not like those media, which do not adhere fully to their principles and values, may perhaps sit and observe this process: independent journalism dying due to economic constraints. One of the most critical and acclaimed newspapers is a good example of this, although it still publishes: “We have lost almost all of our income through advertisements. For example, the [previous] government of Afghanistan is around 2.5 million in debt to our paper. Before the payment, they collapsed” (Etilaatroz). Regarding *Tolo*, they are “still burning cash, and we are not sure how our network will look in the future” (Tolo). This is the largest outlet still operating, with approximately 500 reporters, covering all provinces.

One editor says that the situation “is a lot more dire for local media outlets that have lost all sources of income. They relied upon local advertising opportunities and work with local NGOs or international NGOs. All of that has disappeared after the collapse of the government.”. (Salaam). But the situation is also very difficult for large outlets: “Even some of the famous outlets did not pay the salaries of their staff for two or three months.” (Ariana). This leader confirms this to be the situation also for their media house, even if their staff has been reduced from 384 before mid-August to approximately 100.

In this process of slow financial strangulation, some journalists or indeed editors remain in the profession without proper pay. As one leader says, his medium is “a part of my identity” (Etilaatroz). For how long these persons – women and men – are willing to both face daily risks and sacrifice for the sake of keeping some journalism alive, remains to be seen.

According to our contacts, in early April, four large media (*Ariana*, *Killid*, *Pajhwok* and *Tolo*) addressed themselves to UNAMA to ask for assistance to keep operating from the country. Some have also approached Internews with hopes for support, as the situation for the

journalists remaining on the ground in Afghanistan (oftentimes sole breadwinners) is precarious.

People's need to know: A pragmatic approach

However, the leaders, while being critical towards the current leadership, still seem to take a pragmatic approach to the current situation and try to stretch the acceptable limits. The 11-point guide was sent to several media as an “unofficial order” (see above). Thus, if the outlets want to remain in the business, a good amount of pragmatism is needed to adapt to the new situation. Other options seem to be, (1) shut down the whole medium, (2) become a microphone stand for the new rulers or (3) establish the media outlet fully in exile, while depending on “citizen journalists” on the ground in Afghanistan. As we shall see below, the leaders interviewed still believe it is possible to continue some reporting within the country, while some to a degree consider or practice “hybrid” models, i.e., some reporting from exile, some from within Afghanistan.

One leader says: “we are continuing our work carefully, we are going to keep our coverage and give voice to the people of Afghanistan, who need media more than any time in the country [...] We still try our best to remain as a voice of Afghan people in Kabul and rural areas and raise their voices for their rights” (Killid). Another media leader seconds this opinion stating that “We are committed to the continuation of our work. [...] The people of Afghanistan and the outside world need to know what is happening across the country under the Taliban rule.” (8am).

Another leader, weary about the financial situation says, “As long as we can, we will inform as much as we can” (Tolo). This interviewee is also very concerned with keeping staff within the country: “If we allow everyone to leave, who will stick up for the people?” Another leader agrees: “Honestly, we try to keep those people in Kabul, to give them an opportunity, to work and feed their children. Afghan people need honest reporting” (Pajhwok). The same leader, in an early interview, said the situation was particularly difficult in the provinces, where the reporters lived with more fear; but that they still try to “not have a big problem with the Taliban, try to convince them of our rights to provide accurate information. It is not easy, and they do not respect us. I believe they try to do something to achieve [international] recognition, that is perhaps why they do not touch us”.

This was said in September 2021. The Taliban had declared that the Media law of the previous regime will be respected, although in practice (see below) the situation appears very different. Not least, international bodies and diplomats have continuously pressurized the Taliban to respect press freedom, although with limited success.

Yet another leader confirms the existing constraints which have to do with “partner stations in the provinces [having been] closed down.” (Salaam). He states various reasons for this, not only financial constraints. Three of the stations “were destroyed during the fighting between the Taliban and the Afghanistan security forces. One of the stations was looted during the chaos”. In addition, a number of “women-run media outlets are closed down because the Taliban did not allow women to work in the provinces where they are located”.

The pragmatic approach is accompanied with a dedication to serve people, as well as with varying amounts of stubborn-ness facing the new political leaders, which, according to one leader “detest the media” (Salaam). The level of threat and harassment remains high.

However, another media leader feels that the Taliban also to an extent need to be pragmatic, as he says that “The Taliban recognize the importance of the media, not least as they face the challenges of dealing with IS, with [international] recognition, and with hunger.” Thus, this leader underlines the need to exploit these needs of the new rulers: “The Taliban must adjust, or they will not be able to govern.” (Tolo).

Control, threats, and harassment

Journalists who have covered demonstrations, be they female protesters or activists in general, have been arrested. Mostly, they have been released after a few hours (sometimes days). An account given by the two *Ariana* journalists, who were among the arrested, is illustrative of the situation. These two were brought to Bagram, the prison where the U.S. kept its prisoners (Al-Qaida, Taliban). There, they were shown many torture instruments, which allegedly were used by the previous occupants at Bagram. Subsequently, they were held there for two nights, and then released. They reported this experience as very scary. International media have published widely pictures of journalists who have been beaten.

A journalist told us that they have an intelligence man (GDI) from the Taliban at their station during the morning. He appears ahead of the news meeting. He wants to control what news should be produced and from which angle. It means media outlets should air and publish what the Taliban wants. This caused media outlets to change their approach to news contents and

even their language. An illustrating example is how *Ariana* Television Network developed after August 15th. The station started with different opinion voices, including Taliban and the opposition. For example, on September 13th, the station aired a series of vox pops, which included those who oppose the Taliban. Gradually, this policy changed to only pro-Taliban opinions. In the first week of January 2022, the TV station reported on a suicide battle among Taliban security forces. The TV station used the word of *Estishadi*, which meant those who want to sacrifice themselves. The event reveals that the outlet was under pressure in such a way that they could not use the concept “suicide attackers”.

Cancelled press conference

Nai SOMA, together with other organizations, called for a press conference about an annual report. They had asked permission by a Taliban spokesperson from GMIC (Government Media and Information Centre). The convenors of the conference had planned to release a report, which clearly showed that the Taliban regime was behind most of the cases of violence against journalists. However, at the outset of the event, the speakers and organizers were surrounded and arrested for some hours, and the conference was cancelled. The executive of this oppressive action was the Intelligence directorate (NDS). The cancelling and arrests were criticized by the UN.³⁷ After the conference was cancelled and the Taliban closed off the entrance to the venue, some organizers were on their way to meet the Taliban main spokesperson. They wanted to ask him about the cancellation of the event, despite the GMIC having granted them permission. However, the spokesperson did not let them enter his office and turned off their mobiles.

This is just one example showing how the spokespersons and some of the current rulers may present a more “liberal” image, while others – from Chowkidars (guards) to Intelligence officers – may arrest and/or beat journalists based on their sovereign interpretation of what is permissible according to Islam.

In other words, as confirmed by some of our interviewees, there are some differences, both horizontal (in the leadership) and vertical (leaders vs rank-and file) among the Taliban. One leader says, “Taliban are savvier than the previous version, a 20-yearold may be on Facebook, use Signal, etc. However, there are differences between those in Kabul; but the Logar and Badakhshan versions also have different mindsets.” (Tolo). The arrests and harassments tell of a landscape in which the remaining editors and journalists, some of the latter fresh and inexperienced, will have to navigate in the foreseeable future.

One leader told of a person in the Taliban intelligence service, who “has the [phone] number of all news reporters [...] and if someone said something which is not in favour of the Taliban, they will call them and warn them”. (Ariana). Another one says that they (the staff) “are receiving daily comments and complaints from them [the Taliban] about our reports, analytical pieces and even sometimes on the wording of our reports. [...] Everything we do has been scrutinized since they came”. (8am)

Threats and beatings

One leader describes the current challenges, in addition to financial constraints, as follows: “restrictions on the types of programs it can produce or broadcast, restrictions on how reports can be published, threats to the lives of journalists”. (Salaam). Some of the other interviewees mention how threats to the journalists’ families cause problems for several reporters, in particular for women reporters.

“We have received several threats, no doubt. From 15th of August till now, around 16 “accidents” have occurred. One reporter was jailed for a month, another for five days, some have been arrested and released on the same day. Reporters have received beatings when they ask for clarification of stories.”. The reporter who was jailed for a month was an editor, waiting in Mazar to be evacuated. “Taliban put him in jail, and he was beaten a lot. The family was not ready to publish a story around this” (Pajhwok).

In addition to the physical harassment, in this case this outlet registers another phenomenon; the family of the victim, terrorized, experiences a culture of fear, avoids media exposure, which might aggravate their situation.

There was this story from Logar, where there was an infight within the Taliban ranks by the passport office. We covered that and brought a picture of the head of police there. The Taliban became so angry: why did you publish his photo? Another one was a story of a teacher in Paktia who had received no salary for 4-5 months and had shifted to herding animals (for the Kochis) to survive. We published the photo, and there was a large engagement from the audience. The Taliban were so angry and tried to put pressure on the local reporter. It is sometimes a contradiction between local Taliban in the provinces and people such as Zabiullah Mujahid, he does understand the media better. (Pajhwok)

Another leader spoke of Taliban pressure and the documents they sent from the Ministry of Information and Culture regarding ban of music, film, and women performers/actors. His outlet “struggled for some days; then Taliban increased the pressure and we stopped broadcasting these programs, and shows such as Pakistani, Turkish and Indian soap operas” (Ariana).

“It is now very clear to us: Taliban bans music everywhere! They are trying not to announce that they will ban media, but the pressures work in the same direction,” says one leader, who also reports that in early April, he heard of “a new crisis issue: 100 radio and TV stations have not paid for their frequency to the Ministry of Telecommunications. Taliban sent a letter to two ministries, stating that the ones who do not pay, should be closed. That is another signal that they do not like us” (Pajhwok).

One leader said that Taliban “called the executive director of the organization for a meeting. Their intelligence unit complained about the role of media waging ‘psychological warfare’ against the Taliban. He requested media support. They have visited our office several times and harassed our managers” (Salaam). Another leader voices the same concern: “During the last months, some Taliban representatives visited the media newsroom and ordered the producers and moderators about the roundtables, about the topics, even about guest speakers” (Killid).

Uninvited visits to the newsrooms seem to become institutionalized. From another media house, we learn about a special Taliban appearance in the newsroom. It happened after a gathering in Kabul Intercontinental Hotel, hosted by the Minister of Interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani (one of the most wanted terrorists on the FBI list, and said to be connected to the terror attack on Hotel Serena in 2008). The meeting was held to praise the families of suicide bombers, the interviewee told. “We reported the gathering and used the phrase ‘suicide bombers’ in our report.” The following day, five Taliban intelligence officers came to their office and told them the minister “was very angry about using the phrase ‘suicide bombers’”, since this was banned. Instead “the word ‘self-sacrificed’ should be used”, he said, and added that the other expression would put both the journalist and the media outlet in danger. (8am). According to a reporter who asked to be anonymous, every day during the morning news meeting, there is a representative of the Taliban Intelligence department in the newsroom to oversee the topics and angles of stories planned.

If reporters seek to cover crimes committed by Taliban soldiers, they run a great risk. One leader says that they cannot do this anymore (see below, “The unknown killers”).

It seems that foreign reporters face a somewhat different reality: According to the *Guardian* photojournalist Stefanie Glinski, who has spent years in the country and recently presented a photo essay based on extensive recent traveling; the Taliban have been “accommodating to foreign journalists, a privilege that has not been granted to all Afghan reporters.” She recognizes that “Several have been tortured, beaten, detained and intimidated and have since either left the country or are trying to get out.”³⁸ A probable explanation for this preferential treatment of foreigners may have to do with the Taliban urge for international recognition. This recognition is needed for them to be able to receive and distribute food for starving millions, to pay staff and other salaries, to have the financial system restored, all this in an attempt to gain some level of recognition among their own people.

Red lines and interference

“We benefit from being the biggest outlet, which gives us (more) access to the Taliban. Everything we do since they came is scrutinized. Being there has benefits, but we have encountered violence on more than one occasion” (Tolo). Among the adjustments that media need to take seriously to survive as a profession within Afghanistan, is the observation of written or unwritten *red lines*, which constitute an important part of the daily routines. Religion undoubtedly plays a significant role in this respect. The red line concept, though, is not that concretely defined: As a Lebanese author writes,

Journalists learn to avoid certain subjects or resort to a form of 'code' based on understatement and allusion to avoid crossing the tacit 'red lines'. Practical experience makes it clear that the lines are subject to change or, more accurately, displacement that can widen the area of public discussion. (Kassir 2000, p. 142)³⁹

One may argue that the rather concretely pronounced media guidelines provided by the Taliban, do not seem particularly “tacit”. However, as demonstrated above, some of them are wide and seemingly in support of journalist ideals, and the stricter ones do not include every possible case that might occur. Additionally, as Kassir also mentions, the lines are subject to change, which we also observe in Afghanistan, with somewhat varying practices in the country’s 34 provinces.

One interviewee mentions the “11 items” they needed to adhere to; and how “they replaced a number of news and entertainment programs with religious programs. Journalists do not feel free to choose any topics” (Killid). Another one said that “We have covered women’s protests

as much as we could. How we do it is very different. We try to figure out and learn as we go along” (Tolo).

“Red lines are different from entertainment to news networks. Of course, we can broadcast and talk about hygiene and save lives. But will we continue if we cannot file news? There are no pure answers...”, says the same leader, adding that there is “a committee of overseers. Their role is to review, to tend to journalistic cases, like a complaint commission” (Tolo). The equalling to a “complaint commission” may prove a euphemism, though, since a “complaint commission” does not show up on a daily or regular basis to check on media content before it is published, or to teach individual journalists a lesson. “When you post stories, you face objection”. One example is from a southern province: “This is propaganda against us”, a local Taliban representative complained. (Tolo).

The phrase “we continue our work carefully” synthesizes much of what the media still operating on the ground in Afghanistan might agree on. This has not to do with lack of courage, but with protecting the lives of the journalists who still – out of courageous choice or lack of option – still remain in the country.

One leader defined the “red line” directly, with a somewhat gloomy perspective for the coming few years:

Our red line is the standard of independent journalism. Before the collapse, we were discussing the possibility of the Taliban's return through the peace talks. Instead, the whole country collapsed. *If the situation continues as it is, by next year [2023] there will not remain any independent news media in Afghanistan.* The restrictions on media in Afghanistan are going to become much harder than those in Iran. The Taliban's Prime Minister Mullah Hasan Akhond, once told Waheed Muzhda⁴⁰, an Afghan writer, some years ago, that he never wanted to read even one article in a newspaper, instead, he read the Quran. (Etilaatroz, emphasis added).

On March 17, 2022, members of Taliban intelligence department [broke into TOLO's office](#) and arrested three staff members: the news manager, one legal advisor, and a political program presenter. The two first ones were released after, one hour but the presenter remained in Taliban custody for 23 hours.

One media outlet says there are several stories they cannot publish. They had some sources indicating corruption in the Ministry of Mining: “We tried our best to have access to

information and confirm those issues, but the access to information was blocked. *Our dilemma is that our team hears something, tries to confirm it, but there is nobody to talk to!*" (Pajhwok, emphasis added). This leader tells of several stories being lost due to this lack of access. This is a great paradox: The Taliban asks for balance but is unable to provide the balance by simply answering journalists' queries.

Safety and self-censorship

Safety measures are not only about guards or equipment, although this is absolutely essential in a country ravaged by war and terror. However, for the interviewed leaders, safety is also about media content and self-censorship. One interviewee says that all the (sub) editors "try to be very careful in selection of the topics, as the situation is very sensitive." (Killid). In this organisation, they also limit travels to rural areas. Another one says that they "do not use or have arms, but guards, and provide female reporters with a *mahram*." (Tolo). Yet another one speaks of the special risk journalists encounter in some of the provinces, where local journalists do their best, but are afraid and in need of more job security. The threats to reporter safety may have several origins, as one interviewee confirmed, saying that the staff members on the ground needed to protect themselves both from Taliban and "other criminal and armed groups" (Killid).

One leader said that there is no official safety measure in his former channel, "but they [the remaining staff] are told not to [...] be in conflict with the Taliban". (Ariana). A colleague echoes this by stating that "we are avoiding topics that can get staff in trouble". This outlet has also asked the Taliban to issue a letter to staff members "so that they are not harassed by the Taliban or their sympathizers". The same leader mentions a reporter who was injured, "shot by a gunman who accused him of working for an 'American radio'" (Salaam).

Some have made by-lines anonymous, and one outlet did the same with the current location of their office as a measure of protection for the limited number of staff still working in the country. After a while one outlet also started quoting most of their sources indirectly instead of directly and openly; "but as close and loyal to what they were saying as possible". (Etilaatroz). Yet another interviewee said that they rely on "our personal connections and some local journalist unions inside Afghanistan. *Our only hope is that the international community will hold the Taliban accountable to their actions against media and the public*". (8am).

Here is what one leader says when asked which safety measures her organization takes for their remaining staff in Afghanistan. “All the editors try to be very careful in selection of the topics, as the situation is very sensitive. We limit their travelling to rural areas but try to keep a minimum number of reporters.” (Killid). The same editor also reported on pre-censorship, which seems to have become a recurrent feature, experienced by the interviewed leaders. Some have installed CCTV cameras at the office.

We support and advice our staff: You need to find proof of everything. The rulers do not understand media or media rules. We ask them to be balanced, to try to keep documentation. We have to use anonymous sources whom we can trust. If we do not find solid proof, we cannot publish. Those people watch us very carefully! [...] If a reporter believes (s)he should not use by-line, we take responsibility and sign with Pajhwok only. This is often the case in some provinces. We provide bullet-proof jackets, and special guidelines, as we have a written Pajhwok safety policy. All our staff had insurance; however, this will end in 2-3 months. Due to Taliban’s ban on insurance companies, they cannot operate. (Pajhwok).

As shown by earlier research (Eide et al., 2018), the measures of safety vary. In the current situation, we have no reason to believe that the outlets take their remaining reporters’ safety lightly, and in some cases, this also entails having to refrain from sensitive reporting.

Journalist interviews

It has been a challenge to have access to journalists still working on the ground in Afghanistan, for obvious reasons. Still, we have interviewed a group of reporters, both men and women, and have guaranteed them all anonymity. We do not reveal which media they work for, and they are not in all cases working for the same media, as the editors cited above. In most cases, we have sent a prepared questionnaire through safe communication channels and have asked them to answer as comprehensively as possible. One of the journalists who still tries to exercise his job in a meaningful way, says this about his work under the Taliban:

Working with the media in Afghanistan was never comfortable. If you work as a journalist [...] you have to report about human rights violations, poverty, murder, targeted killings, and violence against women and children. [In] the presence of a barbaric group in power that believes in no values, being a journalist, in my opinion, is a great responsibility and the most difficult task. (JO6)

The last part of the statement: “great responsibility and the most difficult task” captures some of the essence of the ways in which those who are trying to survive in the profession, must feel. At the end of this section, we have added some results from a report on provincial journalists published by Human Rights Watch.

Three layers of barriers

There seem to be three layers of hardships that journalists still working on the ground in Afghanistan have to face in their daily practice: (1) access to information, (2) pre-censorship, and (3) other issues such as safety and financial problems, and uncertainty concerning their future in the profession. All three layers lead them to the dark corner of self-censorship and result in censored and filtered reporting. From our interviewed journalists as well as the editors’ statements, it seems fair to speak about an *institutionalized censorship*.

Access to information

Access to information seems to be the first layer of this institutionalization. The journalists mention problems such as having no specific sources/spokespersons in the governmental ministries, sources being less willing to talk to media, reporters not being able to cover violent attacks without Taliban permission. Our interviewees think the Taliban are not being cooperative with the media. These factors jointly constitute the first layer of barriers against journalists practicing according to the Afghan media law and the principles of press freedom. One informant (JO1) said that many governmental institutions do not have any spokesperson and that this prevents them from accessing information. Another informant (JO4) told of only being able to produce a few investigative reports, “with a lot of difficulties. On the one hand, access to information has been reduced to zero and on the other hand, all sources are scared and do not want to talk to the media.” This reporter says that if they still try and report, they will be charged with espionage and criminal offenses: “leaving the office to cover corruption and other important matters will cost us dearly. *People want to know that things are not going well here but unfortunately, our hands and feet are tied during our work*” (Emphasis added).

JO3 said that they cannot enter the scene of an attack without the permission of the Taliban. If they do, they face violence and other problems. According to JO6, first, Taliban authorities never answer questions that are against their own interests, and second, if they are quoted, and

it is not in their interest, the reporters will be threatened. Thus, to contact the Taliban may in itself be dangerous, and thus some have stopped trying to do so.

Pre-censorship and red lines

The Taliban have pressurized journalists into “consulting” with them before publishing journalistic content. JO3 says that the Taliban issued decrees setting some red lines for the media. “They put pressure on us to prepare our reports in consultation with them. We still try to work impartially and independently”.

It is not just the NDS (National Directorate of Security, later the GDI) monitoring and controlling media. Other departments are involved as well, for instance the Ministry of Information and Culture. JO6 says: “The Taliban’s Information and Culture directors had a meeting with media representatives. The first meeting was held by the Taliban’s director of information and culture for Parwan province, who emphasized that whatever the media outlets and channels want to broadcast or publish, should first be reviewed and approved by the Taliban.”

JO4 told the team, “Intelligence agencies monitor all the media activities, even our social media, but now we are very careful not to get targeted”. The same reporter also told in detail about a murder he wanted to cover, but the Taliban restricted the media outlet, effectively stopping the journalist from investigating. Another local person threatened this reporter in particular. Later, he received a message he had been reported to the Taliban intelligence. His media outlet subsequently just “shared a short news of the event [the murder] but could not share details”.

The red lines that are drawn up, do not comply with the media law, says JO5. The only news he can cover (without fear), is reporting from Taliban press conferences. In other words, the easy, non-risk job is “protocol journalism” (see below for more).

Coverage from the scene of actual incidents is also difficult for journalists. JO4 puts it in a few words, “It is difficult to turn the camera even in public places without permission”. He adds that they cannot speak against the current system, speak out against oppression, publish reports on issues related to women, minorities or others. Furthermore, it is hard to report on security, and no one can talk about ISIS”.

In a story [published by 8am](#) about media restrictions in Central Afghanistan (January 22, 2022), the newspaper cites one of the few remaining journalists in Bamiyan province. She confirms the lack of access to information and says she has to wait for days to receive basic information: “If the report is in any way against the Taliban, it will either not be allowed to be published, or will be censored”.⁴¹

Self-censorship

JO2 says, “Taliban officials have warned us that we must refer to them as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan or the Afghan government, instead of calling them Taliban or the interim government. This was something we had to accept”. In other words, even if some outlets may feel they have the right to use their own wording in their representation of a government, which is not elected by the people, they may have to toe the line in order to stay in business. JO3 says that their work is restricted. “We cannot easily criticize the Taliban actions.” [He adds that “we cannot tell the truth [...] The organization I work for has to give in to the Taliban, but in most cases, they support us.”

This statement indicates the media outlets’ delicate balancing act, where media who still believe they can play a role in the Afghan public sphere have to balance carefully if they still want to provide information to the people. However, how long they can avoid tilting over to be useful “bridges” between Taliban leaders and the people, due to increasing pressure and sanctions, remains an open question.

“As soon as the Taliban took over, the radio and TV channels themselves stopped broadcasting music without being ordered to do so. The number of religious programmes increased.” (JO6). These measures may be seen as a measure taken knowing what would be necessary, perhaps in order to avoid tough confrontation.

JO2 comments on self-censorship, “The Taliban have set up three red lines. Publishing and broadcasting in accordance with the sharia law, observing the national interests, and limitation of women in media. This has caused fear among the media and has opened the way for self-censorship. Thus, many realities will remain hidden and unwritten.”

The negative downward spiral into self-restrained reporting is clear: A regime with a brutal reputation declares some red lines. An atmosphere of fear is already there but further strengthened, self-censorship then becomes widespread, and increasing numbers of facts remain hidden.

Financial problems

The financial problems with the drain of money from Afghanistan have also affected journalists. JO1 says that lack of donor assistance and financial problems were the only problems she has encountered. Only this interviewee sees financial problems alone as the challenge. The rest are likely to mention financial problems together with safety and restrictions. The missing or low salaries affecting their financial security is also reported.

Security and threats

All except one of the interviewed reporters had been directly threatened. The same reporter (JO3) who stated that their outlet cannot tell the truth, added, “After two programs which were critical of the Taliban, I was threatened by them”. JO6 said that “having worked for [his medium] is enough to be interrogated and even punished by the Taliban”. He refers to their outlet wanting to tell the truth and work in a professional way. Among the media these reporters work for, some are more critical than others. This medium has also taken some safety measures, such as encrypted communication. Several reporters refer to the NDS, which has a special section assigned to monitor the media. JO4 tried to work outside of Kabul, but resigned due to threats from representatives of the NDS, “... because of our work they have contacted the head of our office, demanding we should not publish anything against the regime, but I feel that I am under their control. So, I don’t go out much,” he says, and adds that “the threats against journalists and the media are now beyond the reach of the institutions”. His medium “insists that we should work carefully and take care of our lives”. Another outlet seems to have interfered to protect their reporter (JO2), who says that she was told that Taliban had “contacted our office to talk to me, but my colleagues negotiated and solved the problem”.

Bleak future

All but one of our informants on the ground are pessimistic about their future in the profession: “I do not hope”, says JO3:

I don’t see a good future for myself continuing to work with media in Afghanistan, as I’m not optimistic that the situation for free media will improve with all these restrictions and

limitations. Sadly, there is no single organization in the country to defend the rights of journalists.

Whether this last statement holds true, may be discussed, since there seems to be journalist union representatives as well as some watchdog staff still in the country. However, these organisations may feel their hands are tied; they also experience resources being drained, due particularly to the failure of the banking system, but also to less international support.

JO4 says he does not see the future comprised of proper professional work, since he does not think the Taliban will allow the media to work as it did previously. “I feel like I'm in prison. That's why I have nervous problems and I have this worry every day that I would lose my job because of the threats and even now I have stopped writing a [...] book”.

JO5 feels “sincerely” that “if the situation in Afghanistan continues like this, violence against journalists will continue, then I believe that the future of media and journalists in Afghanistan is very bad.” JO6 finds the situation “very frightening now. To be frank, presently working as a professional journalist in Afghanistan is like playing with your life. [...] If the current situation continues, Afghanistan will be worse than North Korea and Iran in terms of journalism and media in general.”

JO1, though, expresses her love for the profession, “and I wish to move forward, and I wish that freedom of speech finds its true place.” She adds that the officials of “the Islamic Emirate respect the freedom of expression of the media and do not ignore the work of the press, because the press is a bridge between the government and the people [...] Efforts should be made to enrich it and not let these good achievements of the last 20 years be ruined.”

This is the only reporter who uses the preferred term for the Taliban regime (however, not in all her reporting according to our observations), and also the only one who expresses some hope that the power holders can be reasoned with. This, like some of the other interviews, was done some time ago, before the last negative decisions were taken with regard to women.

Provincial media: hard for female journalists

In early March 2022, Human Rights Watch released a [report](#) focusing particularly on the situation for provincial media in Afghanistan, stating that the situation there is much worse than in Kabul, while it is hardly reported on. The report mentions that Taliban members are threatening, detaining, and beating local reporters; such violence leads to self-censorship as

well as reporters leaving the profession. The situation is particularly harsh for female reporters. As Fereshta Abbasi, Afghanistan researcher at Human Rights Watch says, “In many provinces, the Taliban have virtually eliminated reporting on a wide range of issues and have driven women journalists out of the profession.”⁴²

According to a female journalist from Balkh cited in the report, Taliban soldiers had beaten her on the street while she was trying to cover women’s protests. She said: “Journalists can easily get beaten by Taliban soldiers in the streets and no one will be held responsible. In the past few months, the journalist from *Arezo* TV has been beaten and a *Pajhwok* journalist in Balkh has been arrested.” (HRW, 2022). One female journalist from Nangarhar still worked, but only from home, as she is not allowed to appear in audio or video programs but can publish her reports online. Another female radio journalist has not been allowed to enter the newsroom, so she must work in the background, as her voice cannot be broadcast.

A male *Tolo* legal advisor, who has been vocal on freedom of speech issues, told our team that he is under immense pressure from Taliban, that he has been told not to show his face on TV, or talk to the main spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid. If he did not obey, he would end up in prison. They mentioned a particularly bad prison.

A radio journalist from Herat who is used to have people from the audience call her and talk about their everyday lives and problems, said to HRW researchers that: “We make sure that they do not complain about the Taliban. Otherwise, we will be questioned.” (HRW, 2022). A female journalist based in Kabul communicated to the team that there are some specific entities that do not even let female journalists cover their events. For example, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Mines, Industries and Petroleum never let female journalists cover their stories.

Many journalists in provincial media as well as female journalists in general are under a heavier pressure than their male (Kabul based) colleagues. This situation caused female media staff across the country to be more eager to leave the country. [The IFJ report](#) on Afghan women journalists (interviewed after arriving in exile), confirms this, and tell of threats growing worse day by day.⁴³ One of our own team members who used to work for media advocacy, receives tens of calls and messages from female journalists asking to be introduced to organizations involved in evacuating journalists and civil society activists. Other team members share some of these experiences. Other team members share some of these experiences, having been approached by both male and female journalists.

6. Media Output: major changes

Here, we present some examples and excerpts of news stories from our material, with particular emphasis on the questions mentioned in the introduction. We first consider journalist *genres* and the (diminishing) diversity of programming, before trying to analyse the level of autonomous reporting, if any, by showing different approaches, from “protocol news” to “critical news”. A problem is of course that we cannot have a full overview of the events happening in the months after the Taliban takeover, nor before August 2021. We are thus unable to confirm extensively all differences in reporting, and areas/events which may have been covered previously, but which now are not covered. In some cases, we may register a change of tone and choice of sources. In other cases, stories go untold. After illustrating the different levels of reporting by means of “case studies”, we provide examples of media coverage in different sensitive areas, such as women issues, violence and abuse (against journalists and others), minority oppression. We also provide a number of examples of reporting. This is a conscious move, which may both provide illustrations of what is (not) possible, and simultaneously give readers an idea of what goes on in the country, at least within our chosen areas reporting.

Genres and variety

A recent report from Human Rights Watch about the situation for journalists working in different provinces outside of Kabul, documents a grim reality. In Bagdhis province, the reporters told that after the Taliban takeover, “music on radio and TV disappeared, even advertisements were not allowed to play background music.” From Kapisa, another journalist said that there were “no longer any political shows or live programs; these have been replaced with more Islamic programs”, while there were no entertainment programs: “Two days ago, one of our technical colleagues mistakenly broadcast two songs, and Taliban contacted us to say this must be the last time [that happens].”⁴⁴

At this stage, pro-Taliban news, current affairs and (un-critical) talk shows represent the most dominant outputs. All soap operas have disappeared. Recently, the Taliban leadership sent a letter to all TV stations to not air any soap operas, even those with Islamic contents. There is supposed to be no music at all. All that is possible to air is the Taliban’s “Tarana”, recitation without musical instruments. A reality check, however, shows that there may be

some exceptions to the rule; for example, distinct background music in the introduction to certain programs, also at the RTA.⁴⁵

Opinions: full stop?

Our observations also indicate the absence of opinion items. A check on the (English) websites of *Tolo* and *Pajhwok* confirms this. It seems very few media try to express their opinions in editorials or opinion pieces (unless it is pro-Taliban and their establishment).

We do not have a comparable overview of the situation before August 15, 2021, but what we have observed after this date, is an almost total lack of written opinion items. The last opinion piece to be found on the *Tolo* website (in our monitoring period) was a piece by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on “World food day” on October 16, 2021.⁴⁶ *Etilaatroz* used to have a daily editorial, but that practice completely stopped after mid-August. They also stopped their “analysis and opinion section”.

In the past, TV stations frequently invited experts and persons with opinions to air from different milieus and ideological backgrounds to analyze events and issues. To a limited extent, this was also done in some talk shows in our investigated period. In the first period after August 15, 2021, some TV stations had talk shows with critical experts. But after the airing of these shows, the experts were threatened, in some cases even arrested. One of the most prominent examples was Professor Faizullah Jalal providing his analysis of the situation in a talk show with *Tolo* TV (November 20, 2021), after which he was arrested. Professor Jalal was released four days later, after a series of requests and protests at the national and international level, including the UN. A second example outside of the three months investigated, was Mr. Baqir Mohseen Kazemi, invited to share his critical analyses of the situation in *Tolo* TV, on February 25, 2022, after which he was arrested and imprisoned for a week. This development of sanctions against opinion-makers certainly creates a culture of fear against airing one’s views. An ‘adaptive’ media policy may be to let the news items/stories that the media outlets still dare to publish, speak for themselves.

Exceptions from this practice are represented by *8am*. This newspaper has published some editorials, although not regularly. After one month of no editorials, they restarted the practice in September 2021, addressing vital issues, such as human rights violations, poverty and government responsibilities, government structure and the tribalist culture, civil war, and its consequences. They also started a series, where individuals could voice their concern and/or

tell their stories. On September 16, 2021, [8am published a long, signed essay](#), attempting to assess the new situation by summing up major events during the last months, titled “Afghanistan has changed a lot since the fall of Kabul”. It pays attention to women’s issues, poverty, oppression of Hazaras/Shias, and the emerging military resistance initiated by Ahmad Masood, the son of mujahideen leader Ahmad Shah Masood.⁴⁷ The newspaper also published critical analyses on the ban on education for girls, cultural barriers for non-Pashto speakers and the fighting (resistance against Taliban) in Panjshir and Baghlan provinces. One article covered the return of Islamic extremism, citing the Taliban as a case. However, these opinion-nuanced articles are published from outside the country, while the Kabul office is responsible for local news. After August 15, 2021, this newspaper publishes only online.

Culture and sports

Due to Taliban constraints, reports on cultural life are few and far between, although we registered a few examples of such reporting. In September 2021, [Tolo published news](#) of the Bactrian gold, one of Afghanistan’s most precious ancient treasures, citing a source who assured that this 2000-year-old national treasure was safe.⁴⁸ In November 2021, *Pajhwok* brought a story on how Iran was willing to help restoration of historical monuments in the Ghazni province.⁴⁹ A similar news was brought by the same agency from Balkh (September 26, 2021), on restoration of threatened historical monuments, however, this time with no mentioned external support.⁵⁰

An important story occurred among others in *Tolo News* on 7 October, the first news on culture for many weeks. It had to do with the closure of the Afghan National Music Institute (founded in 2010), as the last members left Kabul. When the government did not want any music, there was no future for this institute. In the past, it had opened gates and blazed trails for many performers, who learned both Afghan traditional and Western music. In the story the reporter interviews several individuals, who grieve the closure, however, in the same story a member of the cultural commission of the Ministry of Information and Culture said that only Islamic poetry and Islamic topics were now allowed. On music, he said: “Anything that is placed in the Islamic format, for this the gates are opened, but anything that is not placed in the Islamic format, the gates are closed.” Countering this statement, a writer is quoted: “negligence towards music or music institutions in Afghanistan is in fact negligence toward the national culture and tradition of the country.”⁵¹

At *Pajhwok*, most stories found under the “Culture” label, have to do with journalists’ rights. Several of these are clearly critical of the new power holders, implicitly or explicitly. (More examples of this below).

Some other important cases were registered after our initial monitoring period. One case is from Herat, where *Tolo* reported on the fate of a theatre institution in Herat city: [Herat Theatre Faces Uncertain Future | TOLONews](#).⁵² In the same month (March 2022), *Tolo* [reported on two documentary](#) films being made (about road and bridge reconstruction, a rather uncontroversial topic). However, this story has the following lead, “Filmmakers and artists said producing films and series without music and female actors is not possible”, an interesting example of how critical views may occur in unexpected spaces.⁵³

Several media in our sample publish sports news, however now it seems sports news is equivalent to *male sports news*. When they appear, sports items seem to mainly be concerned with male cricket, football or wrestling, tae-kwon-do, and at times the occasional Buzkashi⁵⁴ case. Female sports seem totally marginalized. There has been a veritable exodus of female sports athletes, at least when it comes to the most famous ones with international connections. One month after the Taliban takeover, *Pajhwok* announced that a team of Afghan female football players arrived in Pakistan.⁵⁵ Currently (May 2022), it seems unlikely that the Taliban will allow any female sports activities. Already on [8 September 2021, The Guardian reported](#) the Taliban ban on female sports activities. Here, the deputy head of the Taliban’s cultural commission, Ahmadullah Wasiq, is paraphrased as stating that women’s sport was considered neither appropriate nor necessary: “I don’t think women will be allowed to play cricket because it is not necessary that women should play cricket. [...] In cricket, they might face a situation where their face and body will not be covered. Islam does not allow women to be seen like this.”⁵⁶

A *Pajhwok* news report from November 24, 2021, though, informed women that they may continue to play cricket. However, the main source of permission was the Afghanistan Cricket Board, and not the government. After that date, there is no report in *Pajhwok* of women actually playing.⁵⁷ More [recent news indicated](#) that this promise was still under consideration.⁵⁸ However, the news in early May about the Taliban’s imposed dress codes for women, point in a very different direction.

Celebrations.

Nowroz (Afghan New Year, 21 March, also marked in other countries), has been celebrated in Afghanistan for centuries with family parties and good food, but is regarded by the Taliban as “non-Islamic” (originating from the Zoroastrians), and thus not worthy of a holiday. In 2022, they announced that there would be no official celebration. However, the well-known spokesman [Zabiullah Mujahid](#) told *Pajhwok* that “government doesn’t celebrate events not advised and preached by the teachings of Islam, adding if people celebrate the event government will not prevent them.”⁵⁹

No satire

One of the consequences of the new media regime, is the disappearance of satire. Satire is a popular genre in most media outlets, whether such outlets are print or broadcasting. In the two main newspapers monitored, satire has disappeared. Both *8am* and *Etilaatroz*, are pioneer newspapers in publishing the best journalistic political satire in Afghanistan. They have both stopped publishing satire. Other media seem to be following suit. All political satirists are silent or work outside of Afghanistan. Sakhidad Hatif, one of the best Afghan satirists who lives in the U.S., has stopped publishing any kind of satire, while Musa Zafar (also living overseas) publishes his pieces on social media, where he has tens of thousands of followers. In our query from Afghan satirists, it was evident that there is no satire or any critical humor in today’s Afghan news media. Saad Mohseni, chairman and CEO of the MOBY Group, announced in a talk in Oslo (November 2021) that the comical TV show *Shabake-ye Khande* (Laughter Network) will be aired soon on *Tolo* TV channel, but so far it has not reappeared.

The killing of the comedian [Khasha Jawan](#) (by [Taliban fighters](#) in late July, 2021) is but one of several examples of the lethal attitude of militant and powerful groups toward satire and humor.⁶⁰ And now, it is all but gone.

The killing of Naweed Azami in Lashkar Gah, Helmand, who used satire in his social media posts, is yet another example of the Taliban’s intolerance for the satirical and humorous side of human behavior, although what Naweed Azami published on his Facebook page was perhaps closer to sarcasm than satire. He would comment on the non-payment of teacher salaries, suggesting teachers should not demand salaries from the Taliban, who “themselves don’t have bread” since they were asking local residents for food and charity. Shortly after posting this critique, a group of Taliban soldiers came to his house and took him away,

allegedly for interrogation. Four days later, his body was found floating in the Helmand River. The perpetrators have not been identified.⁶¹

Talk shows – critical arenas?

A few talk shows are still aired, particularly in *Tolo TV*, but also in *Ariana*, albeit with much more caution than before mid-August 2021. Our study aimed to find out whether changes occurred during our monitoring period – when it comes to the relative degree of autonomy. Has there been a shift from being more (relatively) free to being less free?

One of the most important shows has been *Tolo's* Farakhabar, which is still aired. Farakhabar is one of the popular talk shows of *Tolo News*, launched in 2010. It had a critical and controversial format. *Tolo* also still airs other talk shows, such as *Mehwar*, which also still seems to raise critical issues.

After the August 2021 changes, and particularly during the later months of our observation period (late November/early December), emphasis was often switched toward international relations and analytic discussion, which, given the new situation, might offer a safer approach.

From our study, it appears as if presenters posed increasingly critical and direct questions in the beginning, however later, the hosts were mostly delivering questions, which included paraphrasing speakers' utterances. The overwhelming number of topics in the last period of our survey (late November/early December) have concentrated on international relations and multiple Afghanistan-related conferences conducted abroad. Topics such as women's protests were totally ignored. Sometimes, especially towards the end, the moderators/hosts would "throw the ball" at the guests, to invite their controversial quotes. This might be part of a moderators' survival strategy.

Topics include humanitarian crises, education, journalist safety and other security concerns, US airstrikes (the August killing of a family of 11, just when the flight was at its height), refugee crises, and the "Emirate's" first 100 days.

In the initial months, Taliban high-ranking officers were rarely invited to the show. By the end, though, almost every debate featured either an official or one of their allies and adherents. When Taliban officials were invited, they easily avoided questions. This could be attributed to the moderator's lack of experience, or self-censorship,

Well-known Professor Faizullah Jalal and Mohammad Naeem Wardak, Taliban spokesperson in Qatar, were invited to the show on November 20, 2021. The session ended prematurely after Faizullah Jalal uttered some harsh words toward Wardak, calling him a “calf”. As mentioned above, the Taliban arrested him and kept him in detention for four days. [The professor received much support](#) on social media, though, where many changed their profile pictures to Jalal’s portrait.⁶²

An example of a critical question posed in this program, was when the moderator questioned Mohammad Naeem Wardak on the economic crisis impacting ordinary people. Wardak continued to insist that the situation was not the Taliban's mistake. “Don't you suppose a starving man on the street will not really care that his situation was not caused by the Taliban?” Wardak avoided the question, and the interviewer did not further pursue the subject.

Most of the expert commentators/participants on the program who have been invited to speak, were from outside of the country. Guests residing inside the country were sometimes detained immediately after making a statement during the conversation.

Journalist Khpalwak Safi had an exclusive interview with main Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid on October 25, 2021. The journalist appeared to have much more leverage or expertise in asking critical questions, such as this: “the Taliban is promising to forgive everyone, but will they also ask for forgiveness from individuals: ordinary Afghans, who have been victims of the war?” Safi, being Pashtun, might have dared such a critical question, enjoying the benefit of *Pashtunwali* (Pashtun codes), as the majority of the Taliban are Pashtuns. However, this fact did not render him permanently immune, as he was arrested with some colleagues [and held for several hours](#) on March 17, 2022.⁶³

After the Taliban’s seizure of power, talk shows such as *Tolo’s Jahan-Noma* and *Goftman*, which were both intellectual and controversial, were no longer aired.

Ariana, the second-most popular TV station, stopped or changed the theme of most of its talk shows and even dismissed the critical presenters in advance. A moderator who is based outside the country, told the team that the station prior to Taliban pressure, put pressure to their staff to change their tones and mindset toward analytical programs.

Ariana still produces and airs four shows. One is the 6 pm debate, which mainly analyzes the top news of the day in a rapid format. Another, the 10 pm debate, analyzes the top news of the day in detail. *Saar* (watchdog) analyzes different news, both national and international, and

Tahawol (development) analyzes a relevant top issue, but one which is not news. All these four shows have softened the language as well as the process of selecting a topic for analysis, which means the resultant programs are mainly soft news and less controversial issues.

The Farakhabar talk show used to have female moderators, such as Sadaf-Amiri, but after the Taliban, the moderators are all male. Prior to the fall of Kabul, guests on the program were a mix of male and female. Early in the monitored period at least three female guests were observed, but by the last month of the study, only male guests were present. Females who were invited earlier were given additional time to voice their arguments. The previous deputy speaker in the parliament, Fawzia Koofi is a good example of this.

We have only followed the talk show *Farakhabar* systematically for the above mentioned three months. The format used to be critical and controversial but has become much less so in the monitored period. However, several months after our main period of investigation, we observed a *Farakhabar* program (May 3, 2022) which discussed the topic [“Psychological Effects of Closed Schools”](#), with a male host, and three young articulate female speakers in the studio (no men), all dressed in what seems to be considered as proper Islamic hijab (no hair shown, cover of neck up to the chin).⁶⁴ This happened just days before Taliban tightened their recommendations of female dress code, which meant that women should [also cover their faces in public](#) (May 7).⁶⁵

Access to information

One of the important aspects of the situation under the new rulers, is the problem of availability of even protocol news to communicate, due to a rather constant and widespread *lack of access to information*. *Tolo*’s news-site [reported on September 21, 2021](#), that “Afghan media face budget issues” and connected that to the “lack of access to information”.⁶⁶ This lack of access was also a topic at a [Tolo TV talk show](#) on September 30, 2021.⁶⁷ We find a substantial number of news items complaining about this lack of access. And the stories are oftentimes illustrated by photos of the spokesmen cited: a small group of (probably overworked) information leaders, headed by Mullah Zabiullah Mujahid. All media persons we have been in contact with, complain about this lack of access, as shown above. In his early *Tolo News* story, the male reporter speaks to three named male journalists who also complain about the lack of ad revenues. Zabiullah Mujahid replied that no restriction had been imposed on the free media in the country and that the media organizations could continue their

activities. However, Mujahid added that “Minor problems exist in provinces, and we are working to address them. We have allowed free media to operate. We also understand that there is self-censorship.” This, and some other statements from Mujahid indicates that his function – at least in the initial phase of our monitoring – represented the soft face of the Taliban rulers.⁶⁸

In a [news bulletin on October 2, 2021](#), *Tolo* reported on two journalists who were detained by “forces of the Islamic Emirate while covering an event,” according to Masror Lotfi, a member of the Afghan Journalist's Union, who added that “The detention of journalists while they cover events is a serious restriction to the access to information. We even have reports from Parwan that the journalists must get permission from the Provincial culture and information department in order to report an event.”⁶⁹ Here, access to information is connected to other serious sanctions against journalists.

In a *Pajhwok* news item from November 2021 about new restrictions for female journalists, the female sources mention three obstacles to their work: restrictions, lack of salary and *lack of access to information*.⁷⁰ In this case, a female reporter interviews a handful of female reporters, and one male representative of N organization, while the other reports on this issue, are male dominated.

As referred to in the previous chapter, a reporter stated that one of the easy tasks during the current regime, which did not cause harassment or fear, was to cover Taliban press conferences. Journalists, knowing that their support base is uncertain, have to make difficult choices on a daily basis, between taking the easier position as “a microphone stand” or the riskier pursuit of investigative journalism.

Photojournalism – gone?

In the early days of the Taliban takeover, a young freelance journalist (Murteza Samadi) was detained in Herat city, at a demonstration in front of the Football federation. He was accused of encouraging people to demonstrate. Information of his fate or whereabouts was scarce. [Pajhwok published a piece](#) on September 7th, after confronting the Taliban spokesman with the situation, titled “Can’t confirm journalist’s execution: Mujahid”. In the story, they also cite another news agency, which had claimed that “‘Taliban fighters told journalists’ rights activists that they are going to execute Murtaza Samadi.’ Mujahid told *Pajhwok* Afghan News: ‘I cannot confirm the report about the journalist’s execution. There may be some

investigation by the court that will address the issue.”⁷¹ The journalist was released after almost a month in detention. After his release, he did not speak to the press. Samadi is the most well-known photojournalist to be incarcerated by the Taliban.

The following is based on an interview with Maisam Iltaf, who works for a media organization, and has done investigative research on the situation for Afghan photojournalists. He considers the situation for photojournalists remaining in Afghanistan to be very grim, with little or no option to work in the profession. The situation is even more grim for female photojournalists. Most of those he has interviewed have stopped working and are not confident to venture outside to take photos. One of those who did, despite fearing intimidation, beating and torture, covered some women protests in September 2021, and then was beaten by the Taliban; all his equipment was confiscated at the same time.

Those who want to take photos, are told that they need a permit letter from the Ministry of Information and Culture. However, one female photographer who tried to obtain such a permit, was told: “You are a woman. Why would you take photographs?” As also is the case with many non-Pashtuns, especially Hazara photographers, she did not receive a permit. Additionally, if a photographer has such a permit, (s)he might still be stopped or harassed by Taliban soldiers, despite the permit.

It seems that the situation has worsened after the Russian attack on Ukraine, when the global attention to the situation in Afghanistan was diminished. Just one day after the attack, the Taliban started house searches in journalist homes in Kabul, particularly in areas where Tajiks and Hazaras live. And the experiences from these raids, according to the journalists, have been varied. The Taliban who are urbanized and more used to city life, seem to be somewhat more moderate and can give the ones whose houses are searched soft treatment, while others who have been stationed in remote areas to a larger extent behave badly during raids.

The threatening situation might tempt more photographers to use mobile cameras for safety reasons, although most still attempt to use their digital cameras. However, in sensitive situations, such as women protesting, they might try the mobile option. Still, they are at risk of harassment and being deprived of their phones if they are seen photographing women.

As noted elsewhere in this report, some news reports from women’s protests also include whole paragraphs devoted to the harassment of journalists who cover these events.

Photographers, being more visible have special reasons to fear for their personal safety. Early on, after the Taliban takeover, three photographers from *Etilaatroz* were seriously tortured,

and reports on this were shared extensively on social media. There are several such experiences from other provinces also.

In 2021, the APA (Afghan Photographers Association) launched a photo exhibition “Where there is a war, there is still life”, documenting the life of ordinary Afghans during the years before the changes that took place in August. Forty-six photos taken by 27 different photographers were displayed in Oslo/Norway as well as in New York.⁷² Of the 27 photographers who were then residing in Afghanistan, only a handful are, to our interviewee’s knowledge, still in the country. Job opportunities are very scarce indeed. The photographers face economic constraints, political pressure, and their whole professional life is restricted. The brain drain is dramatic. Those who remain frequently express that if any opportunity arises, they will leave. Some photojournalists feel left behind. They feel their plight was ignored to a large degree when the evacuation of journalists was at its peak. Several of them, still in the country, have cases pending, however after the attack on Ukraine the process has slowed down.

Foreign/local

As was also emphasized in *The Guardian* (the article on sports coverage referred to above), there are several differences between how foreign and local reporters are treated. This distinction also affects the reporting. While Afghan photojournalists (and other journalists) know the situation in the country well, and thus are better equipped to report more truthfully, they are oftentimes barred from doing so. Foreign reporters are allowed more access to certain events and persons than are the local reporters. The preferential treatment of the foreign reporters may at times result in a more positive reporting of the situation (but does not necessarily result in an improvement of the conditions on the ground). The Taliban’s practice of double standards affects the local photojournalists severely since the foreign agencies’ alternative could have been to make more use of the remaining Afghan reporters. Iltaf says he has seen examples of how foreign reporters have tweeted and expressed their satisfaction with a situation of peace and prosperity in the country, while disregarding the closure of girls’ schools, the safety situation and the restrictions imposed on the Afghan press.

Sometimes, this differing treatment can lead to emotional situations, as when a seasoned female photojournalist was asked to help (as a fixer) a new international reporter with access to people – people who were no longer accessible to reporters such as herself.

Journalist approaches: protocol, ‘neutral’, critical

In our monitoring, we have particularly looked for vestiges of critical journalism, in a situation where this has become increasingly difficult, not only due to the Taliban-introduced rules, but also due to a situation with reduced numbers of staff on the ground. As there is considerable news output in the various outlets, we may have overlooked some independent critical stories, yet we feel we have received a fair impression of the variety still existing in the selected media. We have tried to group our findings into the three categories shown below, to illustrate the level of independent, critical reporting as well as different tendencies and tones, in a constrained situation. After this illustration, we discuss other stories, sorted by topic.

Protocol journalism

In most media, this is a part of the journalist practice: short references to statements from or measures taken by the powers that be. However, what comes from above, from the powerful, also needs to be (and is mostly) critically digested and edited before it is communicated as information to the subjects of a given nation, or to the world when it comes to global matters. After all, journalism is about providing people with reliable information, which makes them able to make wise decisions affecting their lives. That should of course entail the inclusion of oppositional views, news which warn people against abuse and deprivation from above. However, in societies with many constraints on journalistic practice, where journalists live in fear and are subject to harassment and threats, *protocol journalism* may become the ‘safe’, and at times, the dominant genre.

Protocol journalism may be defined as reporting on ‘protocol’ events such as speeches and press conferences, and merely restating what leaders or politicians say, not followed by critical questions, additional analysis, or scrutiny. The protocol journalist thus becomes a mouthpiece (or a microphone stand) for a politician, a leader(ship) or indeed a business (Andresen, 2009).⁷³

In our media sample, there are many examples of short news items simply referring to what some leaders have decided or said. For the state-run media network, RTA, this is a regular feature, in the sense that they continuously broadcast Taliban messages and programs, propaganda and speeches, accompanying images of Taliban forces by patriotic chanting, religious programs, and interviews with those who support the Taliban. Social news may be

about food aid distributed, road reconstruction, or cash assistance to needy families in the provinces; as well as news of ministers travelling.

Case: The RTA.

RTA: Randomly selected, a typical day of reports (October 4, 2021) from the state-run channel⁷⁴, would look like this: RTA refers to Taliban propaganda, messages, meetings, speeches, and other programs; and cheers the Taliban forces with patriotic chanting and broadcasts religious programs. Furthermore, they present interviews with people who support the Taliban, reports from local Taliban activities (including sport), and some international news. The local news sources are all Taliban supporters or Taliban themselves. Examples of local news may be a report on reconstruction of schools in Khost and a recreation center in Helmand province, and oxygen supplies about to be provided at a hospital in Farah. Additionally, news about the demolition of an ISKP hideout in Kabul (destroying the terrorist enemy). A governor of Khost meets with Mujahedin prisoners. In news reports on the U.S. and the previous government, very harsh words are used. There is no critical news against the Taliban, all news seems to support them. No woman anchors or reporters are to be seen.

A later example is the coverage of a visit by the second Deputy Prime Minister to Uzbekistan with a high-ranking delegation (RTA October 16, 2021). “Commenting on the IEA delegation's visit to Uzbekistan, Maulvi Zia-ul-Haq Haqmal, Deputy Minister of RTA, said that the delegation met with Uzbek officials to discuss health, education, trade, electricity and border customs.” Coverage of such visits helps to inform an audience of the Taliban regime’s attempts to gain recognition by other states.

The previously independent *Ariana* seems to have fallen prey to some of the same logic, largely following the format of protocol news. On January 4, 2022, *Ariana* broadcasted a news titled “[IEA to include Istishhad](#) (martyrdom, heroic death) battalion in the new army”.⁷⁵ The title itself seems to be published in a Taliban-related media outlet.

Another example is the “good news” that sports activities have increased in the country after mid-August 2021. This news was published by *Pajhwok*, November 8, 2021.⁷⁶ No critical questions were asked to the Afghan Olympic Committee, for example, about female sports activities.

Informative, and subtly critical

Somehow related, but not defined as “protocol” is news that does not explicitly criticize the government but provides vital independent information for the public. It could have to do with food distribution, hunger threats, or, as in some examples (*8am*), government appeals to traders and others not to deplete the forests by cutting down all the trees.⁷⁷ There are for example literally scores of news items from the monitored media about people wanting passports. Oftentimes, the journalists report about huge queues at passport offices both in the capital and the provinces. *Ariana* on October 5, 2021, announced that “The Afghan Passport Authority announced that it resumed operations today”. This news may be seen as serving segments of the population who are eager to leave the country (or those in need of identification documents), and indirectly communicates a presumably widespread urge for exile among citizens. An interesting item in *8am* informs that the logo of the passport has not been changed by the Taliban.⁷⁸

In early December 2021, *Pajhwok* published a plea from Amnesty International (AI) to reopen women’s shelters around the country. Their source is AI itself, with no local voices. In this way, they managed to protect vulnerable women activists working in this sector, or at least avoided putting them in danger by quoting them. On the other hand, the text refers to critical statements made by Amnesty, on such subjects as how women who do not have shelters, would be more vulnerable as prisoners, in a situation known for violence against women who had been released during the fighting when the Taliban seized power. The reporter also states that he has shared AI’s report “with government spokespersons”, but with no response.⁷⁹ This example shows how Afghan media may reduce the risk of reporting on human rights by using international organizations as critical sources. There are many such examples in our material, where journalists refer to Human Rights Watch and several other transnational watchdogs. On October 2, 2021, *8am* published “New Taliban regulations severely restrict the media (Human Rights Watch)”.

While several media can refer to more open critique when citing international bodies, they are more careful and do not themselves do this to the same extent, although for example the two newspapers, but also the larger news outlets, quote activists, experts and ordinary people when the topic invites such comments. Women are often covered, especially by *8am*, when it comes to their rights, especially rights to education.

Case: The unknown killers

Few examples are registered in which Taliban members are directly accused of atrocities, for example when they kill or brutally harass somebody. In such cases, reporting is usually more subtle, and one must be able to read between the lines. Examples are many, where news items state that somebody “was killed”, without mentioning the active subject (the supposed killer) or “killed by unknown gunmen”. Of course, there are cases where the killers are unknown, but also in cases where there are witnesses, a reporter must tread carefully to protect his life if he wants to stay in the country and the profession. Witnesses cited are mostly anonymous, in some cases they may be hard to come across for fear of reprisals is speaking to journalists. “Witnesses said” or “People said” are very common expressions in Afghan media. It is now a strategy for reporting on realities and preserving a degree of safety.

There are tens of examples by different media outlets in this regard. Here is one:

“Unknown gunmen using a Ranger military vehicle, robbed three supermarkets in the central part of Kabul city last evening. Witnesses told our reporter that all the armed men covered their faces with their turbans. Police still have not issued any comments in this regard.” This report in one way of safeguarding the witnesses as well as the journalists. Furthermore, it says what happened while indirectly indicate who the perpetrators are.

Robberies in the cities by “mainly Taliban members using Ranger military vehicles”. *Ariana* and *8am* both report on such incidents with perpetrators not being identified. However, audiences may guess rather accurately who the perpetrators are, not least when a report says that the (unknown) armed men covered their faces with their turbans.

On 26 November, [Pajhwok published a story](#) about a former “crime branch chief of Shahrak district in Western Ghor province” who was killed by “unknown gunmen”, and furthermore that nobody had claimed responsibility for the crime. Knowing that Taliban individuals and groups have launched many acts of reprisal against people who previously held official positions (particularly police and military), at least some may interpret this as news about a Taliban reprisal.⁸⁰

One of the most shocking reports of brutality by the “unknown” was published by *8am* on [December 4, 2021](#), titled “A 10-year old child decapitated in Takhar province”. The reporter is in Kabul, and quotes sources on the spot: “A child was beheaded by unknown men in Takhar province, local sources say. Unknown men cut off the head of a 10-year-old child in the district of Rastaq in this province, sources spoke on the condition of anonymity”. The

reporter adds that the cause of the murder is unclear, and that the Taliban have not commented yet.⁸¹ It has not been easy to find other reports on the story, so this might be an instance where there is a challenge of verification.

“Critical news”

Through examples from our gathered material, we here try to illustrate a category we have called “critical news”, which means news/journalism, which puts the current leadership in a bad light, or at least contains some critique of this leadership if not open confrontation or accusations. Through our studies (since we also follow the international media), we may also identify cases, where the internal coverage differs from the coverage made by international or exiled channels. This may bring us closer to identifying current limits to journalists exercising their profession.

In these cases, we observe that reporters try to have comments from the authorities, exercising the journalist principle of the right to respond. However, several news items contain complaints on the lack of access to information from above, including limited access to the very busy spokespersons or other persons in power.

Case: Women protests

Tolo News on September 9, 2021, published a report in which four women sources were interviewed by name, claiming the right to government jobs. Three of them resided in the country, the fourth is former deputy speaker in the parliament, Fawzia Koofi, who was in exile. The report does not have a named by-line.

Excerpts: “Shugufa Najibi, who has her master's degree in law from India, worked in Afghanistan's parliament for around ten years and said: ‘When I went to the office, they stopped me. I asked ‘Why? Your officials say women can work?’ When I left, they told me through my colleagues to not come anymore’ [...] Fawzia Koofi, a former Member of parliament, said: ‘I talked with the Taliban in 2019. They told me that there is no problem that a woman becomes minister or even prime minister or takes some other high positions. Why did they say it like this? I think they said it to show a moderate face to the world and get international legitimacy. This is very disappointing.’”

This is an example of explicit critique communicated by women who dared raise their voices in protest, and not conceal their names, during an early stage of the Taliban takeover. The protection of being in exile makes it easier to be openly critical, almost polemical. The excerpt also demonstrates the willingness to let the sources comment in an analytical manner, by suggesting explanations for Taliban behaviour.

Case: the assassination of Banu Negar

An early example (actually just before our monitoring period began, but worthy of attention, since it is mentioned later, too) of media covering atrocities against women, occurred when a former female prison police officer was murdered in Ghor province. The woman was eight months pregnant. Among other sources, her son Mohammad Hanif, was [interviewed by Etilaatroz](#) (on September 6, 2021) saying that "There were three men, they told us: we are Mujahideen and you are Arbaki.⁸² They tied us up with string and then killed my mother, and stabbed her in the head with a knife and drew out her brain with a screwdriver. It was very painful [crying]."⁸³ The report also carried four photos, a portrait of the murdered woman, the crime scene, another crime scene where nineteen-year-old Rokhshana was stoned to death in Ghor⁸⁴, and marching female members of the national army. *Pajhwok* also [reported the story \(September 5, 2021\)](#), with the title "Gunmen kill ex-policewoman in Ghor". There, an anonymous member of Negar's family is cited, the gunmen remain "gunmen", and a local Taliban representative "He added that investigations are underway. Negar's portrait also appeared in women's protests some days later, as this assassination became well-known both across the country and through international media. It seems the international media more directly make mention of the Taliban in connection with this assassination, while the notion of "gunmen" may also signal that one does not know who the culprits were, or that in such a brutal case, it may be risky to accuse the Taliban of the crime."⁸⁵

On the same date, the BBC published a story, which more directly associated the crime with the Taliban, under the headline "Afghanistan: [Taliban accused of killing pregnant police officer](#)". In the story, they more directly place the responsibility, referring to anonymous witnesses: "Taliban militants in Afghanistan have shot dead a policewoman in a provincial city, witnesses have told the BBC. [...] three sources have told the BBC that the Taliban beat and shot Negar dead in front of her husband and children on Saturday." One source also says he heard an attacker speaking Arabic. The long story, placing the assassination in a wider context, shows the picture of Banu Negar, and another photo of the BBC's seasoned reporter

Secunder Karmani speaking to a group of unidentified men and boys. Taliban leading spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid is interviewed and says that they have nothing to do with the murder, and that “our investigation is ongoing”. The article further contrasts the words and the deeds of Taliban.

Scores of international media covered the story, mostly stating Taliban responsibility in their headlines. One example is the prestigious magazine [India Today](#), with their very explicit title “Taliban kill policewoman in front of kids, mutilate her face in Afghanistan’s Ghor province (5 September 2021). On the other hand, in the lead, the expression “allegedly killed” is used.⁸⁶ This is just one of many examples showing that Indian media follow the situation in Afghanistan closely when it comes to Taliban crimes. On that same day, we did not find anything on the English *Tolo News* website. However, some days later, they published a huge story on women protests, where the first photo showed a group of demonstrating women, one of them carrying a photo of Banu Negar. Her name was also highlighted in the caption.⁸⁷

Categories of coverage

Below, we highlight some areas of special concern, which may serve as indications of the level of independent journalistic reporting during our monitored period.

Women and women’s rights

The situation for women and girls is high on the agenda of not only *Tolo*, *8am*, *Pajhwok*, but also of *Etilaatroz*, but not a priority on RTA. The news concentrates much on the right to education with a strong focus on girls’ access to grades 7-12 instruction, the right to work, general discrimination for those who can still work, as well as restrictions on clothing or gender segregation in education or at the workplace

Second, many news items also cover women’s protests. These protests seem to have been more intensive and larger in number in the beginning of the period than later. International media has covered these events frequently. However, so have several Afghan media.

On September 9, several media reported on women’s protests after the announcement of the new cabinet and the closure of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (*Tolo* at its 6pm news). *Etilaatroz* reported and named female sources, whose statements were very clear: “This is a plan to deceive and silence women [...] If the Taliban really respect women's rights, why

don't they give women a share in the government and in the public offices?" Another said that the "Taliban, as a terrorist group, can never recognize women as equal human beings" (September 6, 2021). The same newspaper, two days later, reported on women's demonstrations in Kabul and Badakhshan, with photos of women holding banners with these texts: "The world is watching us carelessly" and "watch our death" with a portrait of Banu Negar (the police officer who was brutally killed in Ghor province). A week later, the newspaper covered protests against closures of girls' schools with several stories, while women also are reportedly continuing their protest against the closure of the Women's Ministry, declared by Taliban leader Zabiullah Mujahid to be a "symbolic" one.⁸⁸

On October 26, [Sam reported on a women's march](#) in Kabul, featuring women who were chanting "We are hungry", "The silence of the United Nations is embarrassing", "Woman is also human". They called on the United Nations not to support the Taliban until they recognize women's rights. The report refers very critical statements, albeit anonymously, such as, "Meanwhile, the Taliban have specified a limited time to us to stage the protest, and they have asked us not to chant against the Taliban, a protestor told Hasht-e Subh Daily. However, the Taliban resorted to violent behaviour with the women protestors, and they scattered them, the protestor said."⁸⁹ Several other media also covered this protest.

On the other hand, the state-dominated channel, as well as *Ariana*, which turned more pro-Taliban after mid-August, both reported on a women's pro-Taliban protest in Nangarhar. *Pajhwok* also reported from that demonstration. The women demanded rights under an Islamic framework. "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has given women ample permission to pursue their education within the framework of Islam because we need engineers, doctors, employees and teachers we fully allow them to continue their education."⁹⁰ On September 18, the RTA showed their attitude by stating that the women who wear black veils, support the Islamic Emirate and are against the former government and the United States. This is just one of several RTA reports of the same vein.

Women, who risk being killed by family or others, have had access to safe homes in several provinces in Afghanistan. Currently, there is only one such house left, in the capital.⁹¹ In an increasing number of cases, it seems some media highlight the women's plight indirectly, by citing reports from international bodies and NGO's, such as *Pajhwok's* news story referring to Amnesty International in early December 2021: [AI urges the Taliban to reopen women's safe houses – Pajhwok Afghan News](#).⁹²

Case: Fahima Rahmati

On September 12, 2021, a *Pajhwok* male reporter [filed a story](#) on a human rights and social media activist whose home was raided and five family members arrested. Fahima Rahmati is amply cited, addressing Taliban, referring to their announcement of a general amnesty: “Why are you spreading terror? Is government done this way? Why are you forcing me to flee the country? Does Islam allow such acts? I received invitations from three countries, but I rejected them and said the country needs me.” A Taliban representative is also interviewed, and said they thought NDS operatives were hiding in this house in Kandahar and claim these operatives fired on government representatives. Fahima herself rejects this forcefully, and the story title accuses the Taliban: “Taliban attack Fahima house, arrest family members”.⁹³

Tolo news (male reporter) also [published a story](#) on this event, linking it to another in which a woman was killed.⁹⁴ They interview Ms. Rahmati, and also the husband of the woman who was killed, who asks whether it is permissible in Islam to “kill a woman who is outside her house”. *Tolo* refers to Human Rights Watch, who asks the Taliban to investigate the crimes. They also cite a ‘political analyst’ and a Taliban spokesman. The first one asks “Taliban leaders to hand over such people (Taliban fighters) to a court in order for them to face a legal process and thus ensure that no one else repeats such actions. [...] But Anaamullah Samangani, a member of the Taliban's Cultural Commission, said that investigations into the incident in Kabul has begun. ‘We have some information on the incident. We started an investigation. We will find who killed the woman’, he said. Such pro forma responses occur several times when Taliban leaders are confronted with destructive deeds carried out by their rank and file. While there is little doubt that the leaders do try to exercise control over their local members, there are ample reasons to doubt them being serious about following up such crimes.

8am [reported the story](#), focusing on male members of Fahima Rahmati’s family, who had “allegedly” been arrested, but also quoted her as she directed her accusations against the Taliban, “‘The Taliban entered the house and forcefully evicted all the women and children,’ Rahmati added. ‘They beat me and took our mobile phones with them.’” Furthermore *8am* highlighted Rahmati’s record of humanitarian work and cited the local Taliban authorities who accused “irresponsible gunmen” and tried to assure the public they were “seeking to arrest the perpetrators”.⁹⁵

[Etilaatroz](#), paraphrasing Rahmati herself, wrote that, “around 150 Taliban forces raided her home, arresting two of her brothers, and three of her relatives. Everyone in the family was beaten, according to her. One of her brothers was injured while arrested”.⁹⁶

The above examples published barely one month after the Taliban takeover, show that issues, which reflect badly on the Taliban, are covered by several media, with critical sources quoted. The attack on Rahmati was also reported by international media, by [Al-Jazeera](#) and by some Indian newspapers, blogs and websites of humanitarian NGOs. The Taliban responses of “unknown gunmen”, and their alleged efforts to bring them to face justice, seem to have become standard procedure, whenever they are confronted by questions about killings or abuse.⁹⁷

Case: Girls’ schools, grades 7-12, girls’ education

The closure of girls’ schools – most of all the closure of the 7-12 grade schools, remains a significant controversy in Afghanistan, not least after Nowruz 2022 (March 21), when people expected Taliban to reopen these schools right across the country, and a decree from the Taliban forced them to [close again on the same day](#) that they were to open (*Pajhwok* March 23, 2022).⁹⁸ Furthermore, this has been much covered by international media; it was one of the main issues raised during the Oslo Talks in January 2022 and has been repeatedly raised by the UN. It has not least been a recurrent issue in Afghan media. In our material, there are thus many stories, both of demands for a thorough reopening of schools, which have been open for part of the time, and about various actions and protests against the still closed schools.

After the Taliban sent girls from grades 7 to 12 home on March 23, 2022, *8am* called this a catastrophe. The newspaper reported on a [protest of women in Kabul](#). It was titled: “Women Protestors: Tragedy Begins with Closure of Education Doors to Girls”, and notes that the women who marched, carried slogans such as “‘Knowledge is obligatory in Islam’, ‘Reconcile with knowledge’, ‘Avoid extremism’ and ‘Keeping girls’ schools closed is the start of an unprecedented tragedy’”.⁹⁹

In the period after the Taliban takeover, not all such schools remained closed. [On October 8, 2021](#), *Tolo News* reported on girls’ schools being open in Balkh province.¹⁰⁰ The same news outlet stated that this also happened in the provinces of Kunduz and Sar-e-Pul. Here, five girls were interviewed, first names given: “stating that this should happen all over Afghanistan:

“No one should take education from us”. [...] “The head of Balkh's provincial department of education, Jalil Sayed Khili, said that all girls’ schools have remained open in Balkh. ‘We have segregated the girl students from the boys,’ he added.”¹⁰¹

The problem seems to remain even in these provinces, though, since on April 4, 2022, clerics in Balkh [asked for a reopening](#) of the same schools and are referred to by *Tolo*.¹⁰²

The Balkh (and neighbouring provinces) school opening seems as “straight news” at the first glance, without a critical angle. On the other hand, knowing (as the reporters and people do) that most such schools in the country at the time of publishing, remained closed, the reporting promotes an example, which reflected badly (and critically) on the many provinces, which did not allow their teenage girls to attend schools. Referring to “clerics” also contributed to an explicit critique of Taliban who continuously refer to Islam to justify their strict measures.

8am through its nature covers human rights to a large extent and has several stories on women and girls’ right to education. In their series, “People’s story”, on October 11, they [published an article](#) written by a university student, Fawzia Sultani (22) complaining about the dark realities, where her future dreams are shattered:

I spent 12 years in school and successfully passed the entrance exam, getting admitted to the university. During my studies, I worked. I used to prepare storybooks for children in Kabul. I had a good life experience with the children, we sang, and we played children’s games freely in the streets of Kabul. I thought that in the next 20 years, these children should become useful and mature members of our society.¹⁰³

On October 13, the same newspaper published an editorial stating that “[Afghan girls must have access to education](#)”. This is a particularly strong text, referring to Islam, which does not prohibit girls’ education, as well as to Gulf states who also do not adhere to such practices. In its conclusion, it tries to appeal to the Taliban’s urge for international recognition: “If the Taliban are too eager to portray [itself as] a tolerable group to the international community, especially the West, they must also avoid harmful domestic performance. Closing schools to girls and delaying their education is not justified at all. This will undoubtedly have a devastating impact on Afghanistan’s development and prosperity.”¹⁰⁴

In another story, *8am* underlines how it is important for women to be educated and how they take part in social interaction if they receive education. The story is covering a move of women in Mazar-e-Sharif (February 22, 2022) who started to clean up [the streets of Mazar-e-Sharif](#) street when they were not allowed to go to school.¹⁰⁵

Other female protests

In January 2022, a number of women protested in Kabul, asking for release of a Kabul University professor who had been detained by the Taliban after a critical interview with one of the local TV stations. At this time, *8am* did much of its publishing from abroad, but still had an office in Kabul. They [reported the news](#) in a critical way. They cited what the female protesters wanted, where they were gathered, but also cited the UN and the Taliban.¹⁰⁶ By contrast, *Ariana*, based mostly in Kabul, did not cover the protest. Weeks later, the TV station softly mentioned the theme in a different and non-critical way by referring to a statement from United Nations' Secretary General Representative for Afghanistan, who requested that women protesters jailed by the Taliban be released. That the news was biased in favour of the Taliban, is shown from this excerpt "Tamana Zaryab Paryani, her three sisters, and Parwana Ibrahimkhel, who had participated in recent anti-IEA protests in Kabul." It clearly refers to the Taliban form of characterizing the activists as *Anti-IEA protesters*, including the reference to the Taliban regime by its preferred name (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan).¹⁰⁷

The above example clearly showed how news coverage may differ between an Afghan-based news outlet and a (hybrid) outlet that partly publishes both within the country and abroad. The difference is even more significant if we compare Afghan based media outlets and media, which solely covers Afghanistan from abroad.

Covering other violence

Case: abuse of previous government officials

On September 8, 2021, [Tolo published a story](#) with a picture of a man who had allegedly been beaten up by the Taliban. He was a father whose son worked in the police force.¹⁰⁸ The Taliban denied responsibility. Both sides were interviewed. "The father of a former police officer *claims* mistreatment, the Taliban have denied the *allegations*". Judging from the headline and lead, this was a "balanced story". However, a photo showed a man's naked back, with clear scars from beating. And the victim is given textual space to elaborate on his misfortune: The Taliban fired on their house, his son had handed over his government weapon and vehicle, but the Taliban still imprisoned and beat him. The man, Abdul Ahad, asked for justice, and said that such conditions cannot continue. "'They should defend my rights. No one should be allowed to attack people's houses and take people to prison,' he said. However, Taliban officials denied the claims." Later in the story, the *Tolo* reporter brings to light video

footage of a similar abusive event and refers to the Taliban promise of general amnesty for people who previously served in the government.

By-lines and women sources?

Our initial impression was that the female reporters identified were few and far between. Simultaneously, the coverage of women's rights, including the right to secondary education, and women's protests, meant that journalists had to give space for women's voices. And they did so: providing coverage to women leaders, including NGO women, to street activists, to students and teachers, as well as exiled women (politicians and others), and to ordinary (needy) grassroot women. Some were rendered anonymous, but this was also the case with a number of male sources.

Some closer monitoring was then undertaken. Regarding the talk show *Farakhabar*, before the Taliban takeover, moderators and presenters were a mix of male and female, but after mid-August 2021, the female moderators disappeared. Some female sources remained in the first month, a small handful were invited, not least exiled ones such as Fawzia Koofi (previous deputy speaker in the Parliament), and were given ample time to express their arguments, while in the last part of the monitored period, men were totally dominant.

During six weeks of coverage (September-October 2021), the proportion between male and female by-lines as well as *sources* was monitored in *Pajhwok* and *Tolo News*. We have to take into consideration that we have chosen to focus on special areas of concern, and among them, women's oppression, education and protests. In these cases, women as sources (fully named, with first names only, or anonymous) represent 1/3 of *Tolo News*' sources, and 16 per cent of the *Pajhwok* sources.

Regarding by-lines, *Tolo* had 12 female and 34 male commentators, while *Pajhwok* had 61 male and six female reporter by-lines. Both these outlets had a good proportion of neutral by-lines: with opaque designations such as simply "*Pajhwok*" or "*Tolo*" or "Staff", which might conceal vulnerable reporters, among them perhaps more women? In another outlet, *Etilaatroz*, we registered only two female by-lines and 88 attributed to men, and in addition 29 with no by-line. Knowing that the proportion of female reporters decreased drastically already early in the process, the results from these three outlets are not surprising.

Reporting minority oppression:

Afghanistan is a country of minorities. It lacks one ethnic majority. Pashtuns represent the largest group, with approximately 42 per cent of the population, while the Tajiks represent 27 per cent, Hazaras and Uzbeks 9 per cent each, Turkmen 3 per cent, Baluchis 2 per cent, and other groups make up the remaining 8 per cent.¹⁰⁹ The numbers are disputed and are merely estimates, as there has been no national census. When it comes to religion, the situation is different, since the Sunni Muslims are in a solid majority, the Shias the largest minority, other religious minorities being very small.

Ethnicity is a sensitive issue in Afghanistan. The background for varying (in some media very little) coverage of minority oppression may be due to several factors. One would be the (relative) proximity to the (Pashtun-dominated) government and the risk involved in highlighting such cases. Another reason might be the ethnic leaning or sense of solidarity with vulnerable minorities in some media, while a third might be a medium's geographical stronghold and reporters being close to areas where oppression takes place. In our monitored media, we register such a variety of attention to ethnic-based conflicts and oppression. At least we can conclude that some media outlets cover incidents of oppression against minorities in our selected period.

The most important issue – both historical and actual – is the oppression of the Hazaras in Afghanistan. Most of the Hazaras belong to the Shia religious community. In our material, violence against the Hazara minority is reported to some extent, particularly in the two newspapers, most of all in *Etilaatroz*, but also to a substantial extent in *8am*. On the *Tolo News* and *Pajhwok* websites (English), there are also some items registered in the period monitored.

8am covers assassinations of Hazaras: mass killings and mass graves, as well as forced evictions from their areas of residence, after which Taliban supporters take over their houses and land. In *Etilaatroz*, there are articles about the situation of Tajiks in the Panjshir Valley and on Andarab Uzbeks in the North, as well as Hindus or Sikhs in Kabul and Shias in Kandahar. However, most of the stories on minority oppression, are about Taliban treatment of Hazaras. The newspaper covers the forced eviction of 100 Hazara families from provinces Daikundi and Urozgan, as well as the Taliban order to forcibly evict Hazaras from certain areas in Mazar-e-Sharif and other provinces. It also brings news of targeted killings of Hazaras, and the attack launched by armed *Kochis* on the Hazara farms and villages in Maidan Wardak and Ghazni provinces.¹¹⁰ The local sources are mostly anonymous. Reporters

quote local Taliban authorities when they are available, or state that they have tried to do so. When the articles are about the conflict between (Pashtun) Kochis and Hazaras, there are no Kochi sources the online editor of *Etilaatroz* stated that they tried, but did not succeed in accessing such sources.

Case: Daikundi land seizure

8am and *Etilaatroz* are identified as media outlets reporting critically on the oppression against the Hazaras, particularly after the Taliban evicted many members of this minority and seized their land in the Patu district, Daikundi province. On October 23, 2021, under the title [“Taliban Not Allowing the Displaced Villagers in Daikundi to Return Home”](#), *8am* directly accuse the Taliban, and refer to the plight of the evicted: “A total number of about 740 families from several villages in the same district were forcibly evicted, some of whom, according to locals, spend their days and nights in the plains and deserts”. The paper also refers to the resistance against these Taliban measures: “Taliban officials and the local administration came under sharp criticism from the public, politicians, and human rights advocates. Several political parties and figures issued statements at the time, calling on the Taliban to stop the forced evictions of people from their forefathers’ lands.”.¹¹¹

Tolo News also reported on the evictions at an earlier stage: in a report October 6, titled [Moi Rejects Amnesty Intl Report Over Daikundi Killings | TOLONews](#). Here, both Agnes Callamard, Director of Amnesty International, and two former residents in the district speak to the female reporter, one of the latter, saying that the Taliban burned his family house. A Taliban spokesperson is also cited (and this became the headline, with him, Saeed Khosti in the only picture), saying that Amnesty International has not spoken with the Taliban. Both these outlets speak of the oppression although their headlines differ.¹¹²

Case: Kunduz attack

One of the largest attacks took place in Kunduz on October 9, 2021. [Tolo News reports on this attack](#), whose responsibility was later claimed by Daesh (IS). The numbers vary, but at least 46 people died in the attack, while 143 were wounded, according to *Tolo*.¹¹³ An *8am* story, which was [published October 10, 2021](#), tells about this massacre of Hazaras connected to a bomb in the Saidabad (Shia) mosque. More than 50 people were killed in the attack, and 143 injured. Other reports put the number of dead even higher. In the coverage, the massacre is

clearly attributed to IS/Daesh. The Taliban was also blamed for this attack, said to be the first one after the Taliban takeover, since they, as powerholders, were not able to protect their citizens, particularly not Hazaras. The *8am* reporter cites a range of sources, from local witnesses to the UN Secretary General, a previous female deputy minister as well as experienced political leader Fawzia Koofi. Taliban sources are referred to, and state that they will “eliminate” ISKP (Islamic State in Khorasan Province).¹¹⁴

Another example is *8am*’s extensive piece about a report (October 22, 2021) from [Human Rights Watch](#) on this issue. The reporter cites HRW officials, but also towards the end mentions that the acting head of the Ministry of Information and Culture denied that such evictions happened on his trip to Moscow and added that “he would investigate if such an incident has happened, adding that many of the problems stemmed from regional disputes.”¹¹⁵

Other attacks and starvation

On 24 October, [8am published a heart-breaking story](#) of eight recently orphaned children, were discovered starved to death in a poor neighbourhood, where Hazaras constitute the main population.¹¹⁶

While we cannot know what has passed under the media radars, we still find several examples of coverage of atrocities against the Shia – and indeed Hazara – communities in our material. On Friday October 15, 2021 (during Friday prayers), 32 people were killed and 53 wounded in an explosion targeting a Shia Mosque (Fatijma Hussainyia) in Kandahar. IS (ISKP) claimed responsibility. *8am* carried the story, both in text¹¹⁷ and by video.

These brutal attacks on Hazara communities were widely covered by international media. While it has been claimed that the Taliban do not allow such coverage of terrorist actions, at least such stories still appear at times, and clearly did so two months after the Taliban takeover. Without doubt highlighting such attacks is a high-risk activity. A news [article from October 26, 2021](#) from *Etilaatroz* reports on Hazara villagers (60 families) in Ghazni province being forced by the local Taliban authority to pay 1,457,000 Afghanis in compensation for several conflicts that happened decades ago. Among them is a claim that in 2003 a Kochi member was killed, and the tooth of another member was allegedly broken by an unidentified person in the district. “*Etilaatroz* could not get the Taliban’s comment on this issue”. Another article by the same reporter on October 11, 2021, reported on residents in another Hazara

district, about gunmen who issued an order from the Taliban's district police in Balkh to 4,000 families, telling them to leave their homes on very short notice.

Hindus and Sikhs

The Afghan Sikhs, whose numbers have recently plummeted, as early as August 30, [complained to Pajhwok](#) of not being allowed to travel to take part in religious events in India, and that an airplane coming to take them to India for these ceremonies, waited for 14 hours at the airport before leaving empty. The Taliban spokesperson replied that Hindus and Sikhs did not have any travel or other problems in Afghanistan.¹¹⁸ The very few stories that are published on these tiny minorities, do not differ between the two groups. An *8am* news [story \(October 9, 2021\)](#) reports how gunmen identifying themselves as Taliban, entered a temple in the Parwan district of Kabul. They destroyed part of the building and smashed its security cameras. In addition, the gunmen beat and detained several of the guards.

Pajhwok reported (September 30, 2021) on an [“Abducted Hindu”](#) in Kabul, who was freed after two weeks. The news did not provide details but reported that the man was abducted by “unidentified gunmen”. This news agency had other reports in our period of investigation, such as a [report on the Shia Ulema](#) demanding that the authorities should secure their places of worship (October 10, 2021). Attacks on Shia mosques and schools have intensified lately, and ISKP has in some cases claimed responsibility. Like the Taliban, they are known to be very hostile towards the Shia minority.¹¹⁹

Reporting violence against journalists and other media

Four weeks after the Taliban takeover (September 13, 2021), [Tolo News reported](#) on the closures of Afghan media outlets, stating that 153 of them had stopped operating. The reasons given mentioned economic problems, as well as “restrictions”. The news also cited the Taliban as having said “they will try to create a safe environment for media and journalists to continue their jobs.”¹²⁰ The media closures as well as other problems facing journalists/media were reported on several occasions.

On September 7, 2021, [Etilaatroz carried a story entitled](#) “At least 14 journalists detained, beaten and injured during protests in Kabul today”.¹²¹ It brought photos of women in a demonstration, and cited some tweets of Kabul News’ journalists who were beaten by Taliban. Two journalists from Noor TV and Kabul News respectively were beaten and a

cameraman from Kabul TV was injured. Kabul News tweeted photos of their arrested journalist and his injuries. The association of free journalists of Afghanistan was cited. The story also mentioned two journalists from Mazar-i- Sharif who were beaten by the Taliban, while they covered a women demonstration in that city. Here we see how mainstream media makes use of social media to document abuses of journalists.

[The Killid Group reported](#) that the journalists were released after “brief detention” and cited a journalist organization (AIJA) condemning “the harsh move against journalists, calling on the “Islamic Emirate” to implement an effective mechanism for protection of journalists”.¹²²

[Another story from Etilaatroz, published](#) (October 1, 2021), is illustrated by a photo of a Talib pointing a gun at a journalist, and titled (translated from Dari) “Human Rights Watch: New Taliban rules stifle media freedom, and ban critical reporting”. Patricia Gusman, director of the Asian section of Human Rights Watch (HRW), said that the Taliban's new rules are stifling media freedom and forcing the journalists to engage in self-censorship to avoid being imprisoned. Furthermore, the paper cites HRW, saying that the Taliban have arrested at least 32 journalists and beaten a number of them since taking control of Kabul. Among them were at least five journalists from the paper itself, two of them were severely beaten.¹²³

Again, it seemed helpful for local reporters (who might have provided the raw material) to refer to international bodies, when these organizations report on violence against journalists, as in the above.

Almost one month later (October 30), [Pajhwok reported on restrictions](#) and abuse towards local journalists in two provinces near Kabul. This relatively long story cites several local journalists who have been barred from reporting, detained or threatened. Two of them explicitly say they left the profession. One of them, working for a local radio station, was detained by security forces for some hours and was “not allowed to report despite being allowed to do so by lower ranked Taliban officials. Referring to the incident, he said, ‘I regretted being a journalist and decided that I will never work as a journalist again.’” The *Pajhwok* reporter also cites two representatives of journalist associations as well as the Taliban spokesman (and Deputy Minister of Information and Culture) Zabiullah Mujahid as acknowledging “problems with regard to access to information, but said efforts were being made to address them”.¹²⁴

While most of the time it looks as if the local Taliban disobey their higher-up colleagues by being more brutal (while their leaders state that they will investigate), but in this case it seems

to be the opposite, some low-rank Taliban allowed the reporters to do their job, while the “security forces” resorted to side-lining them. This demonstrates the complexity of Taliban ranking and organization, and their disregard (and/or lack of understanding) of journalistic rights of safety and expression.

As seen from the above, the Taliban seem eager to marginalize reports on women protests. They do so by causing repercussions against journalists covering these events. In some cases, reports on protests are combined with ‘meta-reporting’, i.e., the reporter includes the harassment and challenges faced by the reporters who cover the protest, since they are facing some of the same sanctions. This is the case, with [Etilaatroz from September 21, 2021](#). Here, the paper reports on how both protesters and journalists faced the same violent treatment by the Taliban.

On some occasions, it seems (on the surface) as if local journalists and the local power holders have reached an understanding. [Pajhwok reports \(September 23, 2021\)](#) on the governor of Farah province (Maulawi Hizbullah Afghani), titled “Farah governor promises to support journalists, media”. In the text, the governor recognises the journalists need access to information, and then defines journalists’ role more precisely: “He said that media should inform the public about the performance and activities of the government and do their job based on rules and the Islamic framework. He added that officials would cooperate with the media society.” The governor and one local journalist from Radio Dunya are the only sources in the story, which is illustrated by a photo of men with turbans. The story ends with the journalist thanking the governor for “his attention to media. He said that today’s meeting motivated journalists to keep their activities of publishing information to the public”.¹²⁵

[Another more critical Pajhwok piece](#) (September 15, 2021), titled “Jawzjan journalists demand curbs imposed on media lifted” addresses one of the core issues of the Taliban’s media policy by pin-pointing their pre-censorship. Three journalists (one woman, two men) are interviewed, all complaining. One of them says, “the Cultural and Information Department head demanded us to submit broadcasting material with the department before it goes on air”, and states that the Taliban do not believe in freedom of expression. The other sources echo this statement, the female journalist adding that anchors and journalists do not have the right to work and are sitting at home. In this report, there is no comment/answer from the Taliban.¹²⁶

8am has several critical pieces. [On October 6th, they published a long reportage](#) on the situation in the Western provinces, with a long range of sources from a series of different

media. They tell that more than 60 media outlets are permanently closed. The reporters interviewed complain of financial constraints, suspension of a large part of programs (also due to Taliban interference), media closures, a massive number of layoffs, and Taliban pre-censorship. They also mention the personal losses, where journalists, when they were still employed and paid, were the sole breadwinners of their (often extended) families.¹²⁷ The day after, the same newspaper published a report titled [“Only Two Radio Stations Broadcast Their Programs in Central Afghanistan”](#). The story continues with the following lead: “The restriction imposed on female journalists is another reason why the local media outlets can no longer operate freely.”¹²⁸ Like the previous article, this one also mentions financial constraints, and loss of revenue due to the non-presence of NGOs, whose inputs (ads etc.) had helped them survive. One radio station complained of special difficulties, since a majority of their employees used to be women. One journalist complained of the difficulties with having women activists on their program, due to the activists’ fear of reprisals from the Taliban. Several other journalists have also mentioned this challenge.

At times, the mentioning of violence against journalists comes just as an appendix of sorts, at the end of a news story about something else, such as in this [Sam report from September 14, 2021](#), with one sentence reading, “The Taliban also reportedly beat journalists and protesters during the protests.”¹²⁹

An example of more direct mentioning of violence against reporters, was published by [Tolo News May 29, 2022](#), citing *watchdogs* who said that since the Taliban takeover, there have been 140 cases of violence against journalists, and 22 cases in the last month. The same story mentions three missing persons, two journalists and one writer, all allegedly imprisoned by the new rulers. Twice, the reporter refers to the Ministry of Interior, as having “launched investigations”.¹³⁰

Naming the power holders

A *Pajhwok* reporter on December 6, used the expression “Caretaker government”¹³¹, not the Taliban’s preferred title “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” (IEA). We have noticed this, and a variety of other notions used to refer to the current power holders in Kabul. The Taliban regime presents itself as the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” (IEA), and of course would like the press/media to use that title. However, in the media output we have examined, there is a range of ways in which the power holders are represented.

One interviewee told us that they “dropped the term ‘Taliban terrorists’ but avoided using the terms ‘the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ or ‘the government of Afghanistan’”. Instead, they continue using terms such as the *Taliban* or the *Taliban’s Ministry of xyz*. As a reason why they no longer use the T-word (the terrorist group) for Taliban, they refer to their survival. They stopped using earlier designations right after the Taliban took power. Later, the Taliban called this outlet and visited their office, telling them they did not like their coverage, that they disliked “both the events we make news about and the language we use. They were asking why we do not use the term ‘the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ or ‘The government of Afghanistan’. We resisted.” (*Etilaatroz*)

[In a *Pajhwok* news item from September 12th](#), a group of women protesters in Nangarhar, sympathetic to the Taliban, is reported to have asked for women’s rights according to Islam. The news agency cites a local Taliban leader, who of course uses the preferred name “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has given women ample permission to pursue their education within the framework of Islam because we need engineers, doctors, employees and teachers we fully allow them to continue their education.”¹³²

One week later, *Tolo News* publishes [a story on women protesting](#) school closures as well as demanding an inclusive government. In this item, the notions “caretaker government” or “caretaker cabinet” were used to name the power holders.¹³³ This notion signals something less permanent and legitimate and thus, has more critical connotations. On the other hand, in the former example, they seem to have cited a local leader directly, including his preferred reference to the new leadership.

Our impression is that most often, the new power holders are referred to simply as “The Taliban”. In the state channel RTA, it is different, though. Being the mouthpiece of the Taliban, they allow them to define themselves, but also define them according to powerholders’ preferences. One example is the September 13th headline “Afghanistan Islamic Emirate assisted Jawzjan people”, or this headline from September 18, “Parwan government employees return to work and are very pleased with the treatment of the Islamic Emirate.” However, *Ariana’s* news site also uses this title in a headline on September 21st: [“Islamic Emirate official assures donors’ aid will be delivered transparently.”](#)¹³⁴

According to our observations, in *Tolo* talk shows, the moderator may use the noun “Emirate”, while most of the guests do not.

Reporting on Daesh/ISKP terrorism

The Taliban seem to want no mention of atrocities committed by the IS (or ISKP; as the local brand of terrorists call themselves), as mentioned by one of the leaders interviewed above. The reason is most likely that such reporting will backfire on themselves, giving the impression that the new leadership neither have full control of the safety of their own fighters nor the safety of ordinary citizens. Part of the context is the Taliban-U.S. agreement (between Taliban leaders and former U.S. president Donald Trump), as the agreement declares that the Taliban “will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies”.¹³⁵ A broad exposure of IS attacks would demonstrate how this part of the agreement is by no means upheld, and perhaps it is also beyond the Taliban’s might to do so. So far, those who suffer from the attacks, are mostly Afghans, but the transnational character of the IS might reveal other realities in the years to come.

In the monitored media, we find several examples of such reporting, albeit with different tones. Some are favourable to Taliban claims of “wiping out” the ISKP/Daesh. One example is a *Tolo* report on [October 4, 2021](#), where Taliban spokesman Mujahid tells of wiping out a Daesh hideout, adding that “10 members of a family affiliated with Daesh were killed in the operation.”¹³⁶

In *8am*, we find five items reporting on “ISKP” in our monitored period. For example on November 18, the [newspaper reports of the ISKP](#), claiming responsibility for two blasts in Kabul the day before, in which many civilians were killed: “Since the Taliban came to power, the ISKP group has claimed responsibility for terror and deadly attacks on the mosques of Kunduz, Kandahar, and Nangarhar provinces.” Furthermore, the newspaper refers to countries of the world having “warned of the danger of ISKP expansion and activities inside the country; however, Taliban officials do not see ISKP as a major threat in Afghanistan”.¹³⁷ This statement interpreting Taliban’s attitude, must have been deemed rather provocative. On the very same day, [8am interviewed the UN special representative](#) to Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, who said that ISKP attacks have “vastly increased” in Afghanistan. She elaborated by saying that that terrorist group used to be active in some provinces, but that “the group is not actively present in all provinces of Afghanistan”.¹³⁸ [Pajhwok News also reported](#) on Lyon’s statement, saying that, “Daesh attacks have spiked from 60 in 2020 to 334 this year”. They have also carried other reports, several of them about Taliban having arrested some of the fighters, as have other media.

In spite of trying to sanction media reporting on Daesh/ISKP activities, especially those who are not favourable to Taliban, such stories seem to appear in most of our monitored media.

Reporting on the resistance

In Afghanistan, armed resistance against the Taliban exists, primarily in the shape of the “National Resistance Front” (NFR), fighting for the return of the republic. This resistance is scarcely covered in the Afghan media monitored, and some of our interviewees refer to such coverage as a dangerous area to investigate. Nevertheless, it has harvested international media attention. Several outlets and magazines have given space and voice to the most well-known leader, Ahmad Massoud, son of the “Lion of Panjshir”, who was killed by Al Qaeda terrorists on September 9, 2001. One example is [Foreign Policy, August 30, 2021](#), citing young Massoud’s pledge to defend the Panjshir Valley from the Taliban. Later that autumn, the Taliban attacked the valley and now controls at least the central areas, while Massoud is still at large. Several foreign media have continued their reporting on the pockets of resistance. There has also been some report from our monitored outlets.

On September 17, [Tolo News published a report](#), whose headline signaled a state of “normalcy”, “Roads into Panjshir reopen, Telecom services resume”, which would indicate that the Taliban (after some fighting) have full control in the province. However, the lead contradicts this by citing (anonymous) residents who “said 90 percent of Panjshir residents have fled their homes and moved to the mountains amid the recent fighting”. In addition, it mentions how Massoud has a representative who is lobbying the UN not to recognize the Taliban leadership. On [October 2nd, Tolo News reported](#) on the situation in Panjshir, headlined “Panjshir Officials Deny Targeted Killings in Province”, interviewing the deputy governor of the province. He stated that “the fighting has ended in Panjshir, and the resistance front’s forces have no presence in the area right now.” As with the first story, at a quick first glance, this item looks like “protocol news”, but the report mentions three helicopters being destroyed by resistance forces and cites several Panjshiris who remain very critical of the Taliban for causing fear. Some are also named, complaining that they cannot “go to their homes or their farms to work. They have to leave the area”, says one. They also complain of house searches and say that the “Islamic Emirate forces” have beaten some of the residents, threatening them that if they are loyal to Ahmad Massoud, or if they do not give up their weapons, they will be killed. In other words, the two stories speak to the ambiguous situation

facing the largest news outlet: the headlines are leaning towards the new regime, while the lead or bulk of the text point in another direction.

The resistance appears not to be unified though. [On October 23, 2021, *Pajhwok*](#) published the news of former warlords (mujahideen leaders) Abdul Rasool Sayyaf and Atta Mohammad Noor (both important in the North) having created their own Resistance Council.¹³⁹ From the title of this council, it seems more directly related to the last government: High Council of the *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan* Resistance (HCIRAR, emphasis added). The two representatives claimed to work for a “lasting and dignified peace”, a fair election system with participation of all ethnic groups and different segments”, plus guaranteeing fundamental rights of citizens, “especially women, children, the disabled and minorities”. *Tolo News* also [reports on this incident](#), but casts some doubt on its efficiency, since unlike Massoud, the two leaders are said to be in exile.¹⁴⁰

On [October 12, 2021, *8am* published](#) a long statement from Massoud, which condemns the Taliban rulers as well as the previous president Ashraf Ghani for his “betrayal” as he left the country before the Taliban takeover. It also calls for return to “a system which comes to power through the will of the people, in a legitimate and legal process.” On November 1st, the [same newspaper published](#) another story titled “Ahmad Massoud Reinforces National Resistance Front in Tajikistan”, showing that the leader is seeking international recognition from neighbouring states.¹⁴¹ One article from [Etilaatroz](#) carries much of the same message, on the same day, of Massoud stressing the “persistence of the resistance”.¹⁴² These two newspapers are more directly supportive of the NRF, but have more limited audiences than *Tolo* or *Pajhwok*.

As we have little knowledge of which events pass under the radar, due to restrictions and/or lack of reporters, we do not really know the outreach and influence of the NRC.

Although the space for critical and professional reporting has drastically shrunk after August 2021, and protocol journalism has become a prominent way of reporting, we conclude that the space is not totally closed, as we find both subtle reporting not favourable to the Taliban and openly critical reports. See Chapter 8.

7. Related areas of importance for free expression and free journalism

Although secondary to our main approach, through our contacts both those in Afghanistan and in exile, we have also looked at other topics related to the status of journalism and media, post-Taliban takeover.

Journalist education

The current Afghanistan socio-political context is not favourable for professional journalist education. Today there is a massive brain drain of educated professors and other academics leaving the country. [A news report from early May](#) 2022, claims that the Taliban resort to regular sacking of qualified academic personnel, with 50 professors at the University of Balkh province being replaced by Taliban members or clerics.¹⁴³ Another Indian channel has [reported February](#) 3rd, that 229 professors had left Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover.¹⁴⁴

Afghanistan's academic system in general is not up to date. Much of the educational material and systems either date back to the 1980s, the time of the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan, or later, as partial updates to the system via individual efforts. The post-2001 situation paved the ground for more opportunities to update the academic system. In some areas, new studies were established

The journalism field started to receive considerable support, but not the academic education of journalists. A chapter on photojournalism, which is still taught in most of the governmental universities' journalism schools, dates back to 1975. This program explains functions and parts of cameras as they were decades ago, while the actual usage of such cameras has long since come to an end in the practical world of journalism.

However, during the past two decades, academics enjoyed freedom of expression. The changed role of female participation in Academia was a success story. Three of the five deans at the five top governmental journalism schools, in Kabul, Alborzi, Balkh, Herat and Qandahar, had female deans. Furthermore, female students at these universities outnumbered the male students. According to Nai statistics, 70-80 percent of top senior students were female in Kabul University's journalism school in the period since 2017.

The other opportunity that journalism lecturers and professors found during the last two decades was incorporating international material and updates. The new regime of the Taliban has placed severe limits on all such chances and opportunities for journalism schools. Female

academics are no longer deans, most female students either left the country or are under pressure to attend classes in an environment of fear which hampers their level of achievement. Previously they had frequently attained top level. Lecturers are limited to a system in which all materials should be based on Islam according to the Taliban orders, and according to their unique definition of Islam. In general, there is no academic freedom for journalism educators.

A group of Kabul university journalism school students told us that neither lecturers nor students are happy with the re-opening of the universities. “We have a number of challenges including financial issues, as well as mental safety issues that prevent us from being happy with our lessons. Our lecturers are also just showing up at the classes and refer to more book reading as homework. We do not see a clear future for the media. These all cause us to just show up at the classes to have the diploma, not to learn something”. Most student groups are now segregated, so that female students have separate education up to 11 am, and the male students attend after lunch. With a reduced female faculty, this means a further deterioration of journalism education for women.

The number of students has significantly decreased, especially at private universities and institutes. An employee at one of the famous private university journalism schools said that more than 60 per cent of their students either have left the country or do not show up for their classes, usually for financial reasons. “We had to decrease the salary of the staff and also dismiss some of our staff”. A manager at a media educational institute, which provides a two-year diploma in media/journalism, said that they had 245 students at four levels, and previously received 50 new intakes per semester. Now they only have a total of 25 students showing up to continue their studies. “Only three persons registered for the new semester. We do not know if we can continue the process or must just close the institute.”

The Taliban has not officially banned any journalism schools or ordered the ban of books and/or subjects. However, the environment they created, and the new dominant discourses have weakened journalism education and made it less significant compared with the situation under the previous government. In general, journalism education has faced a big problem after the new Taliban regime came to power. This is a big loss after the considerable achievements from the last two decades.

Artistic and literary freedom?

This is an area, which is not systematically covered by our project. However, a representative of Afghan PEN has shared some information and experiences with us.

Many artists, writers, musicians, singers and actors, have left the country. Artists concerned with entertainment have never been approved by the Taliban and had to walk a tightrope to defend their place in society even before August 2021. With the Taliban banning music in mass media, as well as soap operas and other musical performances, there seems to be little space for the arts. On the other hand, while taking into consideration that the Afghan population is younger on average than in most countries, there is a large generation of social media-savvy youth in the country, and not all options to express themselves are closed. According to sources within Afghan PEN, vital YouTube activity still exists, which should be encouraged and supported, as they may at times provide important information as well as literary and artistic content. Poetry is at times read at protests.

On the other hand, according to the same sources, when writers are asked about their futures, nobody wants to stay in the country. The challenge is that “if one Talib is against you, you will face problems. There are no guarantees”. This is the situation even if writers still want to publish, and even if it is still possible to print books. It seems as if the Taliban prioritize control over the media. Or, as one source claims; “they do not read books”. Still, there is the risk of the *one* Taliban representative being informed about an allegedly “blasphemous” book, and then there can be a clamping down on its author. Thus, some writers prefer not to stay in one place, but constantly move around.

For both artists and journalists, according to PEN, some of the same “rules” apply, the three C’s. They need *courage*, they need *credit* (in other words, financial support) and they need *connections* within the country who can support and protect them. But too many artists face financial collapse.

The dangers may still increase. “They [the artists and writers] know that this is the honeymoon period of the Taliban.” It may get worse, says our interviewees.

8. A barren media landscape under the Taliban

Many shorter reports have been issued on media development after the fall of the Republic. They have carried numbers, reported on systematic abuse and not least exposed discrimination of women journalists. This report takes these into consideration, while its main pillars remain our own research on media content, as well as unique interviews with media leaders, journalists and other resource persons with a good knowledge of the media situation. We raised the main question of how the *situation for journalism, news media and freedom of expression has developed after the Taliban took power in mid-August 2021*.

The answer is that the situation is very much changed. From enjoying a healthy degree of press freedom, editors and journalists have since the Taliban takeover had to watch their every step and take care not to provoke the Taliban in order to be able to publish within new limits. There is no guarantee that even this modest publishing can continue, due to financial constraints, strict sanctions, threats and interference, all of which have led to a large exodus of journalists, and a general situation of fear. Below, we specify more findings, in line with our initial sub-questions.

Media closures and staff reductions: The media landscape has drastically altered. In some provinces this means very poor access to even simple information. In the still functioning media, the number of journalists is drastically reduced, particularly the proportion of female journalists. This means – even if the outlets had enjoyed freedom – that the diversity of coverage by necessity is diminished, and access to the situation of women around the country has decreased.

The reasons for the barren media landscape one can now observe in Afghanistan are several. The media were not sufficiently self-financed, and thus suffered a major blow when the financial system was in disarray and subsidies ceased to flow. One may safely say that the media are financially strangled, and that it is almost “against nature” that a number of them still exist, with a substantially reduced number of journalists, and meagre funds with which to pay them.

The staff, then, is also reduced due to the large number of journalists having left for exile fearing persecution and/or not being able to practice their profession. Their fears are real, proven by documentation of arrests, physical mistreatment, abuse and harassment. Whole areas of coverage have disappeared due to restrictions spurred by a narrow-minded interpretation of Islam.

In February 2022, the number of Afghan media outlets was less than half the number during the Republic, reduced from 623 to 305. The number is likely to be even lower when this report is launched. Print publications seem to have suffered the worst fate. Furthermore, the number of staff is often more than halved. Female journalists are down to approximately twenty percent of the previous number, and in many provinces, there are no working female journalists. Some provinces suffer from having very few outlets, so that large proportions of the population are without proper information channels.

Some media have become more *hybrid*, some staff being located and working from exile, with another part working inside the country. In such cases, some stories involving risks may be published and signed from abroad, for safety reasons.

Legislation and punishment. Even if the current leaders claim that the media law issued by the previous government is still in place, the new decrees on what is permissible set severe limits for the remaining media, many of these having been strangled by the decrees themselves. Some decrees are specific, others general, leaving much up to the discretion of local authorities and their tough interpretation, creating a culture of fear and pessimism about the future of journalism in the country. Media outlets by and for women have disappeared. Other outlets have closed when not being able to play music or have radio dialogues with their audiences.

Journalists' work and violence against them: Even if journalist unions, watchdogs, as well as the remaining media do their best under challenging circumstances, it is fair to estimate that instances of threats, abuse and violence against journalists go unnoticed. Still, many cases of arrest, torture and beating, threats and abuse have been reported both by national and international media. In some cases, Taliban spokesmen are cited as willing to investigate such cases, but to our knowledge, no perpetrators have been caught and brought to justice. Our sources also witness to several cases of interference and threats to journalists, who do not follow their instructions. We conclude that *a culture of pre-censorship is institutionalized, which in turn leads to editorial and journalistic self-censorship*, also caused by threats and interference.

Institutionalized mistreatment: While journalists have been subject to harassment and targeted killings also in the years before August 2021, the general mistreatment of journalistic media is now more massive and institutionalized. The lack of understanding of media freedom is demonstrated by the Taliban's negligence of access to information, by their institutional (NDS, later GDI) pre-censorship interference in editorial processes as well as imposed "rules

of conduct” creating an atmosphere of fear and mistrust. *Government responsibility for media control has shifted from the Ministry of Information and Culture to the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice*, whose responsibility is to implement Islamic law in the country, according to Taliban interpretation.

There are now typical *no-go areas* for journalists. Those who wish to avoid being bullied and/or arrested, may have to avoid reporting on women’s protests, human rights activities, the resistance against the Taliban, or indeed the activities of Daesh/ISKP. The media watchdog role, where one major duty is to raise critique against and confront the powerful, is severely diminished; however, the remaining media to a varying degree try to raise critical issues of concern to the population.

Right to be informed: On the other hand, from interviews with seven active media leaders now in exile, and an equal number of journalists still working in Afghanistan, we can draw these conclusions: They find it worth-while to keep on broadcasting/spreading news, and to varying degrees they highlight the Afghan people’s *right to be informed*, even if there are serious constraints on content, as well as attacks on individual journalists. Reports on food distribution may save lives. One argument also mentioned, is that editors feel responsible for employees, whose income is crucial for their families to survive. Many journalists remain the sole breadwinners of their families. However, not all outlets are able to pay their staff members, and most have had to drastically reduce their number of staff. Several reporters seek exile for fear of reprisals. In some cases, where the exodus is massive, the outlets hire new, less experienced – presumably, at least at the outset, sometimes less professional – reporters.

Hybridity: Even if most of the news stories and other reports are filed from the ground in Afghanistan, we see examples of “hybridity”, i.e., media, where most of the content is made in Afghanistan, but some analytical items as well as opinionated genres (editorials, if they at all exist) may be produced from exile. Some media are setting up exiled editorial teams working in close contact with staff on the ground.

The financial situation is described as a major threat to the continuation and professionalism of these media. In the first place, since the blossoming started after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the media were not sustainable, but to a various extent dependent on foreign funds. Perhaps as important is the lack of advertisement revenue, which has almost or totally disappeared. Those who represent news agencies or networks, are particularly vulnerable, since they lost many local media subscribers, when local outlets closed.

Thus, the program output and as well as the news coverage has seriously shrunk. Print newspapers are now online, due to cost reductions. Those who want to stay in the business, have had to accept that entertainment programs and serials are not allowed. The same rules apply to music programs.

Access to information and safety: Several interviewees complain about the lack of access to information and a deterioration of safety for media workers. Some media have taken special safety precautions, such as providing (the remaining) female reporters with *mahram* (male escorts). They are also to an extent selective when it comes to the use of by-line, which may be replaced by “[...] staff” in the coverage of sensitive issues. Another precaution is linked to self-censorship in fear of reprisals and protecting the whereabouts of their institutions.

While some media have closed down or changed to become more or totally pro-Taliban channels, others are determined not to give up trying to report: “We carry on with tears of courage and great determination.”

Although their situations are different, both editors and journalists witness to a situation of institutionalized censorship, and the reporters more so, since they (most of them) encounter red lines, interference and harassment on a regular basis. Having to practice a substantial degree of self-censorship may be hard to cope with in the long run, and we foresee more journalists wanting to leave the profession as well as the country.

Content: how and what can be reported?

How to report? The media we have monitored all have their main leaders – and some of their staff - in exile, while the journalists work in the country. Quite a few outlets keep the bulk of their remaining staff on the ground and try to inform their audiences within the new limits. Some media now simply publish "Protocol news" serving as microphone stands for the new leadership. Others try, in subtle or more open ways, to combine “straight news” that do not provoke the Taliban, such as vital information of food crises, aid distribution, etc. with “critical news”, which reveal facts of oppression and protests. The journalists are obliged to check the facts with the Taliban before publishing, which in a democracy is a journalist principle on the right to respond. However, in many cases, Taliban spokesmen are out of reach, thus causing a crisis of access to information. This is an efficient way of “killing stories”. Another one stems from the culture of fear, whereby ordinary people, be they critics

or victims of abuse, may fear just having contact with reporters. The use of anonymous sources and by-lines seem to increase.

We know that many reports of atrocities and abuse may appear through social media, and we also know that YouTube groups try to publish both cultural items and items of protest and abuse. However, with our limited capacity we have focused on “redactional” media, which are supposed to follow journalist principles. Here, as elsewhere in the world, there is no doubt that social media activists also contribute to and inspire the news output in traditional media, and perhaps to an even larger extent, as the Taliban has so far not interfered much in the usage of social media in the country.

Women’s voices. The discrimination of female reporters by special decrees, *entails a fundamental loss to Afghan journalism and means that many important areas of life in a gender-segregated community have become inaccessible to the media*, and thus to their audiences. As protests against the treatment of women, when it comes to work, secondary education, and functions in the public sphere, are an important part of our material, we find women’s voices in a substantial number of stories. A more general approach including all stories, would have shown a different picture. We register very few women by-lines in some of the largest media. These low numbers may be further reduced with the latest Taliban (May 2022) decrees on women, which increase the restrictions and interferences in women’s work.

Reports on oppression of minorities. Reporting of atrocities against ethnic and religious minorities, such as Hazaras, Shias, Tajiks, Sikhs etc, is found in our monitored material. However, while the two newspapers monitored (one in particular), seem to pay much attention to such discrimination, the other media do this to a more limited degree.

Journalist education, art, etc. Journalism education, in line with the general deterioration of academic life (not least due to brain drain/exile, but also due to forced replacement of skilled professors), suffers. In our research, we have found several reports on oppression of academics and their activities, and student informants tell of a gender-segregated reality, where there is little to learn, but where some remain to meet others and eventually obtain their certificates.

Reporting of culture is reduced to an absolute minimum. However, there remain some few reports on the deteriorating situation for writers and artists, while their products, such as in the case of Afghan satire, or Afghan music, have disappeared. On the situation for journalists themselves, we find more items, in most of the media monitored. These include reports of

arrests and abuse, frequent complaints about the lack of access to information, and the sanctions against journalists trying to cover protests.

Struggling for survival – a balancing act

The dilemmas facing the remaining Afghan media and journalists are not so different from those found in other authoritarian regimes. If they stay, they have to make some compromises with the powers that be, and risk being accused of supporting or at least giving some legitimacy to the rulers. On the other hand, there is, as several of our contacts mention, the argument of people's right to know and the duty of journalism to try and provide the information people need so as to plan better for their immediate and longer-term future. On May 19, 2022, *Tolo News* published a statement from Zabiullah Mujahid ("spokesman of the Islamic Emirate"), where he says that the activities of the Commission on Media Violation (CMV) and Access to Information, which were suspended last August, will "resume in a few days". The lead reads that the "suspension of these commissions has attracted much criticism".¹⁴⁵ Whether this act will lead to any practical changes for Afghan journalism, remains to be seen.

The majority of Afghans will stay in Afghanistan, and those who wish to serve this *right to know*, must be present in the country to share Afghan realities, including suffering, grief and demands for a better life.

However, according to our research, many of the remaining journalists do not want to stay in Afghanistan. A major reason is their concern for personal and family safety. However, the lack of financial security, reduced or no salary, is probably just as important. If not always articulated, professional concerns also play a role. Several reporters complain of not being able to pursue the stories of their choice, and about the level of imposed interference in editorial rooms with pre-censorship and restrictions.

Even if Afghan journalism currently is facing a diversity of restrictions as well as individual threats and abuse, it would be disrespectful to ignore the journalistic efforts still being made to report from the ground and bring information to Afghan citizens. Not all news provided from the still existing outlets is *protocol news*. The Taliban efforts to further constrain the remaining media indicate that they still perceive there are some problems with reporters. Otherwise, they would most likely not have made such extensive efforts to control and interfere.

The twenty years of media blossoming between Taliban regimes – albeit with severe challenges – contributed to the emergence of a new generation of journalists, a generation familiar with the principles of reporting and the necessity for a free press. The space for professional practice according to these principles is now very narrow. Those who still try, with some compromises, pragmatism – and yet with energy and courage – to fill the journalistic space that exists, deserve our respect and support, as do those who sought exile in the face of lethal threats and a lack of future options.

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UNAMA (2022) Special Report: Killing of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists and Media Workers in Afghanistan.

Annex 1:

Oral sources/people interviewed for this report:

Editors/leaders

8am/Hasht-e-Subh: Sanjar Souhail. 22 November 2021. Name used: 8am

Ariana: Sharif Hassanyar. 18 April 2022. Name used: Ariana

Etilaatroz: Elyas Nawandish. 18 March 2022. Name used: Etilaatroz

Killid Group: Najiba Ayubi. 28 February 2022. Name used: Killid

Pajhwok News agency: Danish Karokhail. 25 September 2021, 6 April 2022. Name: Pajhwok

Salaam Watandar: Nasir Maimanagee. 13 April 2022. Name: Salaam

Tolo News/Moby Group: Saad Mohseni. November 2021, 13 April 2022. Name: Tolo

Other interviewees/sources

Six individual journalists working on the ground in Afghanistan, both in Kabul and elsewhere, granted full anonymity.

Dr. Samay Hamed, secretary general of Afghan PEN

Maisam Iltaf, media worker, expert on photojournalism

Anonymous academics at some journalism schools, as well as contacts with other journalists through social media.

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- ¹ Observations, EE, during visits in 1997 and 2000.
- ² Both names are used here, the GDI was established and replaced the NDS in January 2022. CPJ 2022)
- ³ [Afghanistan's intelligence agency emerges as new threat to independent media - Committee to Protect Journalists \(cpj.org\)](#)
- ⁴ Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar (2019) Afghanistan: Navigating between enemies and restrictive forces. In Eide, Elisabeth, Orgeret, Kristin, and Mutluer, Nil (eds.) *Transnational Othering, Global Diversities*. Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- [Afghanistan: Navigating between enemies and restrictive forces \(diva-portal.org\)](#)
- ⁵ Azeta Hatef & Tanner R. Cooke (2020) Winning hearts and minds: A critical analysis of independent media development in Afghanistan. In *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, Vol 13 (2), 114-129.
- ⁶ [Explore CPJ's database of attacks on the press](#)
- ⁷ [Special report - killing of human rights defenders and journalists 2018-2021 - unama - 14 february 2021 english 0.pdf \(unmissions.org\)](#)
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- ⁵³ [Afghan Film Screens 2 New Documentaries | TOLONews](#)
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- ⁶⁴ [FARAKHABAR: Psychological Effects of Closed Schools Discussed | TOLONews](#)
- ⁶⁵ [Islamic Emirate Announces Rules for Women's Covering | TOLONews](#)
- ⁶⁶ [Afghan Media Face Budget Issues, Lack of Access to Information | TOLONews](#)
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- ⁷⁰ [New restrictions on media worrisome: Female journalists – Pajhwok Afghan News](#) 22.11.2021
- ⁷¹ [Can't confirm journalist's execution: Mujahid – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
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- ⁷³ Kenneth Andresen (2009) Producing “protocol news” in Kosovo’s public broadcaster: Journalism in a transitional risk society. In *Conflict&Communication Online*, Vol. 8 (2).
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- ⁷⁵ <https://ariananews.af/iea-to-include-istishhad-battalion-in-new-army/>
- ⁷⁶ [Sports activities increased under new regime: ANOC – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- ⁷⁷ RTA on 3 December 2021: “Badghis Department of Agriculture tries to prevent pistachio forests from being cut down.”
- ⁷⁸ 8am 29-30 November 2021: “Taliban: The Republic emblem in the passport has not changed”
- ⁷⁹ [AI urges Taliban to reopen women safe homes – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- ⁸⁰ [Former Ghor police officer killed home attack – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- ⁸¹ [A 10-Year-Old Child Decapitated in Takhar Province - Hasht-e Subh Daily \(8am.af\)](#)

- ⁸² *Arbaki* has been used as a term for the ancient tribal system in Afghanistan, but was also used by Taliban to accuse the pro-government militia prior to their takeover.
- ⁸³ <https://www.etalatroz.com/131132/brutal-murder-of-former-female-police-in-ghor/>
- ⁸⁴ Rokshana was stoned to death, allegedly for resisting a forced marriage and “eloping” with another man. Whether the culprits were “tribal leaders” or Taliban soldiers, is unclear. [Afghan woman stoned to death for alleged adultery | Afghanistan | The Guardian](#)
- ⁸⁵ [Gunmen kill pregnant ex-policewoman in Ghor – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- ⁸⁶ [Taliban kill policewoman in front of kids, mutilate her face in Afghanistan's Ghor province: Reports - World News \(indiatoday.in\)](#)
- ⁸⁷ However, since we have monitored only the website and the talk shows, we do not have a full overview of their TV news programs, where the killing might well have occurred.
- ⁸⁸ [\(etilaatroz.com\) شود بازگشایی دخترانه مکتب و فعال دوباره زنان وزارت: کابل در معترض زنان](#)
- ⁸⁹ [Women March in Kabul - Hasht-e Subh Daily \(8am.af\)](#)
- ⁹⁰ [Nangarhar women demand rights under Islamic framework – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- ⁹¹ EE, private interview.
- ⁹² [AI urges Taliban to reopen women safe homes – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- ⁹³ [Taliban attack Fahima house, arrest family members – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- ⁹⁴ [Woman Activist in Kandahar Says Family Members Beaten | TOLONews](#)
- ⁹⁵ [The Taliban Have Allegedly Arrested Two Brothers and a Brother-in-Law of a Civil Activist in Kandahar, Afghanistan - Hasht-e Subh Daily \(8am.af\)](#)
- ⁹⁶ [\(etilaatroz.com\) «برند طالبان را نزدیکیم از نفر سه و برادر دو» قندهار؛ در مدنی فعال یک ی خانه بر حمله](#)
- ⁹⁷ [The world should not yet engage with the new Taliban government | Opinions | Al Jazeera](#)
- ⁹⁸ [Reopening of secondary schools for girls delayed – Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- ⁹⁹ <https://8am.af/eng/women-protestors-tragedy-begins-with-closure-of-education-doors-to-girls/>
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- ¹⁰³ [Lost Dreams of an Afghan Female Student - Hasht-e Subh Daily \(8am.af\)](#)
- ¹⁰⁴ 8am afghan girls must have access to education
- ¹⁰⁵ <https://8am.af/eng/educated-women-and-former-government-employees-clean-the-streets-of-balkh/>
- ¹⁰⁶ <https://8am.af/eng/kabul-women-protested-over-faizullah-jalals-arrest/>
- ¹⁰⁷ [UN asks IEA to probe issue of missing Afghan women | Ariana News](#)
- ¹⁰⁸ [Kabul Man Claims Abuse, Detention by Taliban | TOLONews](#)
- ¹⁰⁹ [Afghanistan - World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples \(minorityrights.org\) Encyclopedia Britannica presents the same proportions.](#)
- ¹¹⁰ Kochis are Pashto nomadic cattle herders, mainly keeping goats and sheep. They are told to represent more than two million Afghans, the majority nomads.
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- ¹¹² [Moi Rejects Amnesty Intl Report Over Daikundi Killings | TOLONews](#)
- ¹¹³ [Kunduz Mosque Attack Victims Buried in Groups | TOLONews](#)
- ¹¹⁴ <https://8am.af/eng/targeted-killings-of-hazaras-continue-unimpeded/>
- ¹¹⁵ <https://8am.af/eng/human-rights-watch-hazaras-targeted-by-forced-evictions-and-land-grabbing/>
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