Executive summary

- The most urgent press freedom issues in Afghanistan are currently security, financial challenges, access to information and risk of political instability.
- Support from the United Kingdom for press freedom in Afghanistan includes support for media outlets that play a crucial role in communities. Stations like Salam Watandar, a radio network that broadcasts content via more than 100 community-owned radio stations throughout the country, connect Kabul to regional communities and promote democratic engagement. They are of paramount importance.
- The UK has positively impacted press freedom in Afghanistan through providing financial assistance to media outlets, technical assistance and, crucially, moral political support.
- To bolster the UK’s support for press freedom and fundamental rights in Afghanistan, I recommend increasing financial support for Afghan media outlets, placing pressure on the Afghan government to protect journalist safety, and cultivating partnerships between Afghan media and experienced British media outlets like the BBC.
- Support for press freedom must be a long-term investment. I advise against employing a “one-size-fits-all” model. Instead, it is more productive to employ a tailored approach that responds to actual on-the-ground needs in different countries.

Introduction

1. I am the director of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC), a countrywide safety structure covering all 34 Afghan provinces that monitors incidents and provides media professionals with advice and practical safety measures. AJSC has local safety trainers that work collaboratively with media houses, press clubs, unions, civil society organisations, local authorities and law enforcement.

2. Founded in 2009, AJSC made significant achievements in fostering support and solidarity to journalists and Afghanistan’s media community. AJSC maintains a 24/7 hotline as well as safe houses across Afghanistan. It provides training on both journalistic skills and safety – including risk assessment and management, first aid and conflict sensitive reporting, social media and digital security – and offers traumatised journalists support from a team of trauma counsellors. In keeping with its collaborative nature, AJSC also works to train police and security forces to encourage cooperation on safety. In 2017, AJSC received the Free Media Pioneer Award from the International Press Institute (IPI) and International Media Support.

Priority press freedom issues in Afghanistan

3. The highest priority issue is security. We have seen violence against journalists significantly increase in the past three years. Afghanistan was the deadliest country for journalists in both 2018 and 2017. Clearly, security is a critical challenge for the media that must be overcome.

4. Secondly, Afghan media faces serious financial challenges. Since 2014, international assistance to Afghanistan has significantly reduced. This has created grave financial challenges for the multitude of media outlets that exist in Afghanistan, which has created existential threats. The consequences are most strongly felt by small media...
outlets, which play a very significant role in raising community awareness and encouraging people to engage in democratic processes like elections.

5. The third issue is the threat of political change. Negotiations with the Taliban are currently taking place in Afghanistan with the goal of reconciliation. How will reconciliation affect the media and press freedom in Afghanistan? It is a serious question and a serious concern because the Taliban do not believe in press freedom. This disparity in priorities places press freedom at risk.

**Importance of international governmental support for press freedom in Afghanistan**

6. International support for press freedom in Afghanistan is extremely important. The violence in Afghanistan means the country is intimately dependent on foreign aid. Financial assistance plays a vital role in sustaining the media and press freedom in Afghanistan. The recent economic depression means Afghan media outlets have been suffering grave financial challenges since 2014. Additionally, the market does not offer sufficient capital to media outlets through advertising revenue. Therefore, foreign financial support is crucially important.

7. For example, Salam Watandar, a radio network that is produced in Kabul, broadcast through over 100 radio stations across the country. This radio content plays a tremendous role in enabling the public to make informed decisions and raising their awareness about the importance of education, health, and democracy. Almost all of these programs perform a vital function by highlighting human rights violations in local communities, especially women’s rights. These outlets have reduced the distance between the Kabul and the country’s periphery by connecting the two through airwaves and sharing events of the local communities to policy makers in Kabul. Given Afghanistan’s mountainous terrain, there are parts of the country that normally take five or six days to reach. Radio stations that inform us of events in regional communities and localities overcome geographical barriers and connect these towns to the centre of the country.

**The UK’s impact so far on press freedom in Afghanistan**

8. The UK has had a very broad role in promoting press freedom in Afghanistan. The UK has provided financial assistance to media outlets, technical assistance, and – most importantly – moral political support. Afghanistan is a country that has undergone four decades of war. These four decades have produced many groups who oppose the very concept of press freedom. Therefore, the political and moral support of countries like the UK have created a crucial bulwark against the pressure applied by these groups to curb the media and suppress press freedom in Afghanistan.

9. For instance, the British Ambassador in Kabul frequently meets with high-ranking government officials, particularly ministers of security organizations. In one of the meetings I had with the British Embassy a while ago, I requested more advocacy directed at leaders of security organizations to encourage the government to take more meaningful action towards safeguarding the safety of journalists. Meetings like these, which use a diplomatic presence to put pressure on Afghanistan’s government, have successfully pushed the government to take more bold and decisive actions regarding journalist safety.
How the UK can better support press freedom and fundamental rights in Afghanistan in the future

10. The UK can provide more financial support for Afghan media outlets. Media outlets could be assessed on the basis of the efficiency of business models and business plans. Considering the UK’s role in Europe, they could mobilize European Union (EU) countries to support press freedom in Afghanistan.

11. Additionally, the UK government could apply more pressure on the Afghan government to oppose killings of journalists by groups such as the Taliban.

12. The UK government could also foster partnerships between Afghan media and experienced organizations such as the BBC. Training programs, or partnerships to protect content, would enable the transfer of technical knowledges and skills to Afghan journalists.

Considerations for UK’s global support of media freedom

13. Support from the UK government should not be short-term. Support for values such as press freedom requires long-term efforts, investment and supervision. It is very important that the UK create strong coalitions in support of press freedom. For example, the government should unite with other major European countries such as Germany or France, or lobby with the US or Canada.

14. Fundamentally, the efforts of the UK government must be in partnership with local Afghan organisations. When it comes to supporting press freedom in foreign countries, governments should not make the mistake of a “one-size-fits-all” model. Each country has its own issues and problems, so it is crucial that the UK government listens to local actors and tailor their support to the actual needs on-the-ground.

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