



AFGHANISTAN: Media output is source, target of unrest

Thursday, January 31 2008

EVENT: The Senate yesterday endorsed the death sentence recently awarded to a journalist for blasphemy.

SIGNIFICANCE: Senators also dismissed foreign criticism of the Mazar-e-Sharif Council of Religious Scholars ruling, which must now pass through higher courts and be approved by President Hamid Karzai. The sentence caused alarm amid growing concerns about the implications for the media of worsening security, as the control of information is increasingly at stake and reporters risk becoming targets or tools of conflict.

ANALYSIS: Media reconstruction has been hailed as one of the major successes of the post-Taliban period. Where there were a few religious publications and only one radio station in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, there are now:

- hundreds of publications;
- over 70 radio stations;
- twelve television stations; and
- thousands of journalists.

The booming media sector has:

- supported the electoral process;
- broadcast programmes critical of the government; and
- enabled female journalists to regain a presence on the airwaves.

However, structural problems make the media a flashpoint of conflict and vulnerable to commandeering.

Media model. In 2002, there was some debate about whether to model the media sector on the British Broadcasting Corporation or on the free market system practised in places such as the United States. The state broadcaster was revived, but the US model became dominant as dozens of independent broadcasters also launched across the country. The rapid expansion of the independent media sector had some unintended consequences:

- There are few qualified and experienced journalists and the high number of outlets has diluted talent and degraded the overall quality of output.
- Competition over dwindling media funding means broadcasters rely on cheap, foreign entertainment, especially from India, to boost market share and raise advertising revenue.
- With advertising the only means for achieving financial sustainability, the media broadcast commercials for luxury items that are unattainable for most Afghans.
- Inclusiveness has tended to be deprioritised, with mainstream commercial success predicated on pleasing the majority and privately funded outlets upholding narrow (usually political) interests -- a shift from the Soviet era when the state broadcaster catered for all linguistic groups.
- The task of informing citizens has become relatively more difficult as the state broadcaster cannot compete with the glamour of commercial media and buying airtime for public service announcements in the dominant non-state outlets can be very expensive.

Moral backlash. Growing criticism of the media parallels that elsewhere, with cheap but highly popular programming (especially from India) being consumed voraciously but amid fears about the erosion of social values and 'dumbing down':

- The elite denounce the way Hindi films and music videos have become daily staples in homes when educational programming is perceived as a greater priority.
- Government commissions have attempted to curb what they see as inaccuracies, excesses and destabilising influences in the media.

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- Religious groups as well as devout Muslims decry un-Islamic content and 'corrupting' television programming such as provocative music videos and what they perceive as negative depictions of Islam in Hindi serials.
- Feminists, aware of the irony of being on the same side as religious conservatives, deplore Hindi programmes for characterising good women as obedient, tireless homemakers and bad women as mobile, educated and working.
- Urban Afghans report an unaccustomed sense of alienation as the highly social tradition of Afghan culture has been reconfigured to sitting around the television set.

Propaganda impact. Anger over perceived un-Islamic reforms galvanised public support for armed resistance against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s. At present, Afghan media, especially television, are a symbol of progress and pluralism, but also an ongoing source of moral outrage and fear that social values are being eroded by an influx of foreign programming.

However, despite increasingly heated protests, attacks and attempted government reforms, controversial media programming is unlikely to be taken off the air as the powerful media conglomerates insist their outlets must uphold principles of market demand and freedom of expression. Meanwhile, the Taliban are waging an effective 'hearts and minds' campaign to exploit grievances using several means of communication to convey that they are (see [AFGHANISTAN: Taliban presence in the north is growing - November 26, 2007](#)):

- strong, effective and able to force concessions from the government;
- linked with previous resistance movements (especially against the Soviets);
- linked with regional resistance (especially that in Iraq) to US foreign policy;
- a better choice for peaceful and stable rule;
- defenders of national honour; and
- a force for truth, morality and the protection of Islam.

The Taliban have found resonance in playing to public frustrations over the killing of civilians, distrust of foreign agendas, anger over lack of progress and fears of societal corruption (see [AFGHANISTAN: Karzai is weakened as insurgency grows - July 4, 2007](#)). Their status as local underdog to the superior firepower of the international coalition has enabled them to maintain morale and generate support from the public (see [AFGHANISTAN/NATO: Opinion polls do not signal progress - December 14, 2007](#)). Recent incidents including the abduction of a US aid worker and an attack on the Serena Hotel in Kabul represent major propaganda coups for insurgents and signify the loss of Western power.

Vulnerability. The majority of independent media outlets are financially strapped, inexperienced and highly vulnerable to the poor security situation. Historically, the media have been commandeered or intimidated to promote political interests by incoming regimes. Reports indicate that coalition forces, the Afghan government and the Taliban have suppressed reporting through intimidation, destroying evidence and attempting to legislate self-censorship.

Individual journalists under threat face isolation and have little recourse for protection. At least six journalists have been deliberately targeted and murdered since 2001. There have been no convictions, even in cases where evidence has pointed strongly towards particular individuals or groups. Reports suggest that the current climate of insurgency and anger over moral corruption is allowing powerful factions to conduct personal vendettas with impunity:

- Zakia Zaki, a radio station manager, was last year shot seven times and killed in her home, supposedly because of her potential to corrupt young girls with her radio shows. Locals believe powerful commanders she had criticised were responsible for her death.
- Parwez Kambakhsh, a young journalist who was sentenced to death this month by the Council of Religious Scholars in Mazar-e-Sharif for allegedly insulting Islam, has a brother who has been critical of former Northern Alliance commanders.

CONCLUSION: The media sector is institutionally embedded with values of openness, individualism and choice, but has brought unaccustomed commercialism, alienation, escapism, perceived immodesty and over-saturation to a country with a history of factionalism and weak central government. Media output is a highly visible source of grievances over the 'corruption' of social values and foreign interference -- grievances that the Taliban is exploiting -- putting those within the sector under pressure from the government, coalition forces and the Taliban to choose sides or risk becoming targets of violence.

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