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3.8. Journalists and media workers

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last update: May 2024

This profile concerns the situation of journalists and other media workers.

COI summary

Prior to the takeover, journalists, media workers, commentators and human rights defenders were targeted by anti-government armed groups as well as by former State actors, warlords, powerful local figures, and organised criminal groups. This was especially the case for those who expressed opinions and monitored or reported on human rights issues (especially women's rights), critically covered activities of parties in the conflict, exposed corruption, criticised impunity, etc. There were reports of killing, beating, intimidation, detention and mistreatment of journalists [COI query on journalists, media workers and human rights defenders, 1., pp. 2-7; State structure, 1.8.1., p. 24; Conflict targeting, 1.2.9., pp. 48-51; 1.5.1., pp. 65, 67; 2.3., pp. 74-75].

After the Taliban takeover, numerous journalists fled Afghanistan or went into hiding, most female media workers lost their jobs and Afghan journalism has been facing challenges related to the restrictions imposed by the Taliban, violence, and financial problems [Country Focus 2023, 4.6., p. 89].

The Taliban have issued national decrees and instructions limiting the work of media and journalists including prohibitions of indecency and profanity in the media, communications and letters (6 May 2017), unauthorised assemblies (8 September 2021), defamation and unproven criticism of *de facto* government officials (2 July 2022). They have also issued instructions for the media not to address topics in conflict with Islam or 'insulting national personalities', and to produce reports in coordination with the Taliban government's media office (23 September 2021). It was also ordered that female news presenters 'must' wear headscarves when appearing on screen, and that male news presenters 'must' wear proper clothes (22 November 2021) [Country Focus 2023, Annex 3, p. 160].

In March 2023, the *de facto* minister of higher education warned that 'all those who undermine the regime, whether that is via tongue, pen or practically, are considered rebellious and deserve death' [Country Focus 2023, 4.6., pp. 89-90].

According to the monitoring project Afghan Witness (AW), opposition largely dispersed during the Taliban's second year of rule. Media and human rights organisations have been under pressure, *inter alia* by rules limiting media content, a ban on defamation and 'unproven criticism' of *de facto* government officials, as well as 'open criticism' according to a Taliban official's statement. *De facto* state authorities have interfered with the work of media outlets and have detained journalists as well as human rights activists [Country Focus 2023, 1.1.3., p. 20].

The issued restrictions on media were vague, and difficult for media workers to follow in practice. The media that were still operating reportedly adjusted their reporting in general by decreasing potentially provocative content, while content praising the Taliban increased. Moreover, there have been reports of increased self-censorship among Afghan journalists as a result of continuous harassment. Reporting on certain topics and events, particularly women's rights issues and women's protests, might lead to abuse [Country Focus 2023, 4.6., p. 90].

Women journalists have been banned from state-run media outlets and those in the private sector have been allowed to work within certain restriction, such as covering their faces when appearing on TV and working in gender-segregated offices. Also, female journalists have been barred from attending press conferences, and from interviewing male government officials. Since the Taliban takeover, 80 % of women journalists are estimated to have lost their jobs [Country Focus 2023, 4.4.5., pp. 77-78].

During the reference period, the media landscape and press freedom have further deteriorated in Afghanistan, and journalists have increasingly faced surveillance, intimidation, threats, violence, arrest, and detention from the *de facto* authorities. Sources reported that, across the country, journalists have been held for questioning for hours or days and then released and have been beaten up by the *de facto* security forces on the streets of Kabul, Herat and Kandahar. From 15 August 2021 until 15 August 2023, the civil society organisation Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC) documented a total of 366 violations against media freedom, including the case of 3 journalists who were killed in Kabul and Balkh, 23 cases of journalists being injured, 176 cases of temporary and mid-term detentions, with frequent reports of insult, physical violence, and even torture during detention. At least 139 cases of threats and 25 cases of physical harassment and beatings were also reported. From March 2022 until August 2023, UNAMA documented arbitrary arrests and detentions of at least 115 media workers. Between July and August 2023, the Taliban carried out a series of raids against journalists and independent media outlets 'at an astonishing pace', leading to the closure of some media platforms and the arrests of journalists, including the arbitrary arrest by *de facto* GDI of nine journalists from six provinces in August 2023. The nine journalists were subsequently released [Country Focus 2023, 3., p. 4; 4.6., pp. 90-91].

In March 2023, ISKP carried out a bomb attack in Mazar-e Sharif during a ceremony marking 'Afghan Journalists Day', killing 2 journalists and a security guard and injuring at least 15 other journalists [Country Focus 2023, 4.6., p. 91].

Conclusions and guidance

Do the acts qualify as persecution under Article 9 QD?

Acts reported to be committed against individuals under this profile are of such severe nature that they amount to persecution (e.g. killing, arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention, beatings, torture, enforced disappearance).

What is the level of risk of persecution (well-founded fear)?

For journalists and media workers seen by the Taliban as critical of them or as not complying with conditions set by the Taliban, well-founded fear of persecution would in general be substantiated.

For other journalists and media workers, the individual assessment should take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as: gender (i.e. women), origin from areas where ISKP have operational capacity, personal enmities, etc.

Are the reasons for persecution falling within Article 10 QD (nexus)?

Available information indicates that persecution of this profile is highly likely to be for reasons of (imputed) political opinion and/or religion.

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