

Afghan media attacked on all sides

KABUL, Afghanistan – Ajmal Nakshbandi was not the first Afghan journalist to die in this increasingly dangerous and corrupt country since the advent of civilian rule more than five years ago. But the young interpreter's gruesome beheading by Taliban insurgents in April – after the government negotiated a deal to release his Italian employer – struck a well of outrage in an Afghan public that feels whipsawed between a violent insurgency and a government it no longer trusts.

"I am angry at the Taliban because they are wild men who would do anything, but I am also angry at my government, because it was their job to save my brother," said Munir Nakshbandi, 23. "He was an innocent person, and he had just been married. Was the life of an Italian journalist worth more than his?" In recent months, the Afghan press – a struggling institution that was virtually extinct less than six years ago but has gradually emerged as a powerful force for social and political change – has come under attack from all quarters of this conflicted and confused society.

The greatest physical danger comes from the insurgents, who regularly attempt to use local journalists as conduits for their declarations but also target them for kidnappings and bombings. The Taliban repeatedly has warned Afghan journalists or interpreters like Nakshbandi not to work for the foreign or government media. One Afghan reporter was killed by a suicide bomber last year.

According to journalists associations and human rights groups, however, intimidation and harassment of the Afghan news media have come from a variety of sources, including government prosecutors, police, regional militias, parliament, Islamic clerical councils and U.S.-led military forces. Unlike their foreign counterparts, Afghan journalists cannot easily leave the country and are more vulnerable to official pressure.

"We are very concerned about the state of press freedom. The security situation is getting worse and worse, and the behavior of the authorities is getting worse and worse," said Fazel Sangcharaki, a former deputy minister of information who now heads the National Union of Journalists. "Some officials want more control of the press. The government is getting weaker, and they do not want the media to expose its flaws."

A comprehensive list of threats to press freedom from January 2006 to February of this year, compiled by Media Watch Afghanistan, an advocacy group, included the beating and jailing of journalists, among other incidents. One provincial radio station was set on fire, a TV discussion show was dropped under government pressure, and a magazine editor was detained by U.S. forces for three weeks without charges.

In many cases, the problems stem from resistance by officials or influential groups to press investigations or negative attention, a new phenomenon in a country where, for a full generation, the media were essentially an arm of the state or political factions during successive phases of communist rule, civil war and Islamic oppression.

The establishment of the country's first independent TV stations in the past several years has exacerbated the tensions, since the immediacy of the medium is so powerful. In 2001, while Afghanistan was under Taliban rule, television was banned in the country. Now, according to a private poll conducted this spring in major cities and provincial capitals, 67 percent of people surveyed said they watch TV every day or almost every day. Tolo TV, a popular independent television channel that has a Western-style entertainment and news format, has clashed repeatedly with Afghan authorities.

Its camera crews have been prohibited from covering parliamentary debates, and its hard-hitting talk show was banned. In several cases, reports of media harassment have stemmed from alleged misdeeds by U.S.-led coalition forces. In one high-profile case in March, U.S. troops deleted video from Afghan camera crews trying to cover an incident in which U.S. Marines fired on civilians in eastern Afghanistan, killing at least 10, according to a preliminary U.S. military investigation. U.S. military officials have said they are still investigating what happened.

Far more often, though, the pressure comes from Afghan authorities, who are widely seen as corrupt, heavy-handed and intolerant of public questioning. This growing perception helped explain the outpouring of grief and



anger that came after the execution of Ajmal Nakshbandi and the quick rush to blame President Hamid Karzai, who freed five Taliban prisoners in exchange for the Italian journalist, Daniele Mastrogiacomo, but refused to release two more in exchange for the Afghan man.

“If the government had taken action, my brother would be alive today,” said Munir Nakshbandi. “I thank all the world journalist groups who tried to get him released, but unfortunately my government did not help its own son. I have lost all hope in them now.”