

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



December 30, 2015

110 Journalists Killed in 2015

Throughout the world, the journalists play a very important role. They keep the public informed and support them in becoming aware of their socio-political circumstances. Without the journalists providing timely and updated information, it is very difficult for the people of all walks of life to keep pace with ever changing nature of today's society. As the journalists provide a very valuable service to the people, they have certain rights as well that should be protected by the governments and different organizations and institutions. Mostly, the societies that are well developed and have great respect for knowledge and information, make sure that the rights of the journalists are guarded properly and they are provided with such circumstances wherein they are able to perform their responsibilities with full dedication and devotion.

On the other hand, the societies that suffer from political instability and experience wars, and disturbances and do not recognize the worth of true knowledge and information tend to forget the vital responsibility of guarding the rights of the journalists. The journalists in such societies tend to suffer from different sorts of discriminations and, unfortunately, even lose their lives.

Mostly conflict zones are dangerous for the journalists. In order to provide true and timely information, the journalists have to move into or close to the places where wars and conflicts happen. They, therefore, put their lives at risk and try to fulfill their responsibilities. Different groups, organizations or countries in such zones have to be very careful about the rights of journalists and make sure they are not targeted. However, that does not seem to happen and many journalists lose their valuable lives every year. Moreover, because of the influence and approach of different extremist networks, the number of journalists losing their lives in the peaceful countries is also alarming.

According to an annual roundup by Reports Without Borders (RSF), a total of 110 journalists were killed around the world in 2015. The details show that sixty-seven journalists were killed in the line of duty this year, and another 43 died in circumstances that were unclear. Another 27 non-professional "citizen-journalists" and seven other media workers were also killed.

The report reveals that the high toll is largely attributable to deliberate violence against journalists and demonstrates the failure of initiatives to protect media personnel. There is also a growing role of non-state groups - often militants such as the Islamic State group - in perpetrating atrocities against journalists.

A shocking revelation by RSF is that in 2014 two-thirds of the journalists killed were in war zones. But in 2015, it was the exact opposite - two-thirds were killed in peaceful countries.

RSF Secretary General Christophe Deloire emphasized that the creation of a specific mechanism for enforcing international law on the protection of journalists is absolutely essential. Non-state groups perpetrate targeted atrocities while too many governments do not comply with their obligations under international law.

The numbers mentioned above are really alarming and demand from the authorities around the globe to take serious steps to curb the situation. Lip service alone would not suffice; there is a need for tangible and sincere effort in this regard.

Apart from the right to life, according to International law, journalists are entitled for certain other rights as well which all the governments and organizations around the world must respect. Journalists, according to the Declaration of Rights and Duties of the Journalists, must have free access to all information sources, and the right to freely inquire on all events conditioning public life. Therefore, secret of public or private affairs may be opposed only to journalists in exceptional cases and for clearly expressed motives.

Therefore, any factor hindering the journalists from having access to all information sources must be considered illegal and should be eliminated. Moreover, the journalist have the right to refuse subordination to anything contrary to the general policy of the information organ to which he collaborates such as it has been laid down by writing and incorporated in his contract of employment, as well as any subordination not clearly implicated by this general policy. And, the journalists cannot be compelled to perform a professional act or to express an opinion contrary to his convictions or his conscience. Ill-fatedly, Afghanistan is also one of the countries that have not been giving enough heed to the rights of the journalists. The war and conflicts and the negligence of the relevant authorities have resulted in different sorts of discrimination against the journalists in the country. Afghan government and different other organizations and groups must make sure that they strive to protect the rights of the journalists as they are not a party to the conflict and do not serve anyone's purpose. Provided that the rights of the journalists are protected, it is important that the journalists must fulfill their responsibilities in the best possible manner. They are required to respect truth whatever be the consequence to themselves, because of the right of the public to know the truth; defend freedom of information, comment and criticism; and report only on facts of which they know the origin of; not to suppress essential information nor alter texts and documents and not to use unfair methods to obtain news, photographs or documents.

The Urgency for Sustained Electoral Reforms

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Despite the rejection of the two presidential decrees by the parliament on amendment of the electoral law and the law on structure, functions and responsibilities of electoral commissions, the relevant electoral authorities would go ahead with the electoral reforms and the preparations for the upcoming parliamentary elections. According to the media reports, President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah met with the members of the electoral reforms commission, calling for swift implementation of the recommended reforms. In the meeting, the President has said that "the [parliamentary] election will be held between next summer and fall." Ghani has called on the start of the work of the Selection Committee for bringing reforms to the two electoral commissions. The exact date for holding the upcoming parliamentary election will be set by the Independent Election Commission.

The decision from the government to authorize officials to follow up the electoral affairs based on the recommended reforms is coming after the parliament's recent rejection of the two presidential decrees over the reforms process virtually froze the amendment of the two electoral laws, as recommended by the electoral reforms commission. Reacting to the decision, an election monitoring organization on Tuesday December 29, 2015 severely criticized recent rejection of the decrees on the reforms process. The election monitoring organization (ACSEN) said that the parliament should not have included consideration of the two decrees in the house's agenda. The parliament's refusal to start considering amendment of the two electoral laws have created a major hurdle for the electoral reforms process and the amendment of the electoral law and the law on structure, functions and responsibilities of the election commissions.

Despite the stalemate developed for the reforms process by the recent decision of the parliament, the go-ahead for the conclusion of the recommended electoral reforms from the president is coming as a short-term breakthrough in the process. It will provide the opportunity for the selection committee to start work on considering a list of names for recommending to the president to choose the members of the two commissions. It is now expected that the selection committee start its work for nomination of new members to the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission. The process for recommending new members for the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission and the president's final decision over the members of the commissions will be a time-consuming task.

However, the problem would not be resolved unless the parliament approves the recommended reforms or they are legalized through another presidential decree. The two electoral commissions cannot be established based on the new recommendations of the electoral reforms commission until the recommendations are included in the law on structure, functions and responsibilities of the two electoral commissions. If formed based on the recommended reforms, the structure and make-

up of the two bodies without modification of the law by the parliament would not be legal. Given this, despite the go-ahead from the government for the reforms process and preparations for the parliamentary elections, the task cannot be completed without resolving the stalemate created by the Wolesi Jirga members.

The issue would not be resolved by only authorizing the authorities to start working on formation of the assumed reformed electoral bodies and preparations for the upcoming parliamentary elections. There is an urgent need for formation of the two electoral bodies based on the reforms recommended by the reform commission because this would pave the way for other preparations for the next year elections. The authorities cannot announce a date for the elections unless the main election commission is formed. Only when make-up of the two electoral commissions could be finalized by the president, the Independent Election Commission will be able to announce a new date for the parliamentary elections. The implementation of the recommended reforms to the electoral laws, the electoral commissions as well as the electoral system will prove crucially difficult and controversial. And not to forget, there will be many more time-consuming management and electoral preparations ahead of the electoral officials.

Political compromises over controversial issues are always harder than legal and bureaucratic processes. The government leaders and the rest of the Afghan political spectrum have come a long way to agree on reforming the country's electoral system to avoid political crises in the future. Bringing reforms to the electoral institutions of Afghanistan was one of the main points of political agreement which led to the formation of the national unity government in Afghanistan. The government and the parliament should not go ahead with the crucial task with negligence, and make what compromises and required to find a legal way for a lawful process of reforming the electoral system and commissions.

The legal gap that is going to overshadow the whole electoral reforms process should be filled. If the reforms process is not concluded as predicted, the two electoral commissions could not be formed based on the recommended reforms, and without a new election commission in place, a new date for the parliamentary elections cannot be determined. And it remains unclear if the government and the parliament will be able to set a new date soon and prevent another delay in holding the country's key parliamentary elections. Both the House of Representatives and the government need to work harder to deliver the task of reforms to the election law and the electoral commissions as soon as possible. The legal stalemate should be resolved and the lengthy process for the reforms should be carried out with more urgency so the ground would be ready for the electoral commissions to get preparations for holding the upcoming elections. If the state and the country's political spectrum fail to bring about a reform electoral system based on consensus, it will lead to development of further failures and setbacks in the future.

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The Success Story of Telecom Sector in Afghanistan!

By Muhammad Rasool Shah

As a fiscal year ends, there comes a severe criticism against different ministries for not exhausting their allocated budgets. This is not the only reason to criticize the ministries of the country. Massive corruption, nepotism, administrative lapses, and many other reasons combine together to bring a horrible image of all the government ministries. There are also some ministries that only exist in paper and have hardly done any activity to justify their existence.

However, telecom and information technology sector of the country is an exception in this case and has showed unprecedented success and growth in last 14 years of democracy. It emerged as the sector to expand rapidly, adding millions of dollar into the economy in the form of tax revenues. The indirect contribution of this field to the economy spans in billions of dollars. The credit of this unbelievable success goes to the ministry of communication and information technology. It was the good luck of this ministry that it had talented and skilled ministers and present minister of Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, Abdul Razaq Wahidi, is regarded as the perfect man of his field. While working for the ministries of education and finance, he brought remarkable changes. While working in the ministry of education, he improvised new methods to improve the system of KANKOR (university entrance examinations in Afghanistan). His vision to bring latest technology and ideas into the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology will definitely bring an era of new change and advancement not only in this ministry but also in the whole country as this sector has become the backbone of the economy of Afghanistan. When we come to the achievements of telecommunication sector in Afghanistan, it was so impressive that GSM Association awarded the Global Leadership Award to Afghanistan in 2011, in recognition of the achievements of the country in the telecom sector. It was surprising for many foreigners to see that Afghanistan was not much developed in different fields and sectors but they were really astonished to find and experience that telecom sector in the country was so advanced and well-established that it could have been easily compared to the telecom sector of any developed country. The achievement also makes much sense keeping in view the fact that when Taliban were ousted of power in 2001, there was hardly anything on the name of infrastructure in the sector. More or less was the case with other sectors of the country but after 14 years of democratic government, other sectors also improved but it was not as brilliant as was the case with the telecom sector. Let us have a brief look at the achievements of this sector.

At present, there are five GSM companies working in the country, which makes the competition quite tough in the sector. The fair and healthy competition between these companies has made possible a market driven by the natural forces of supply and demand and sets the choices and preferences of end users on top. It is the reason why, the mobile phone users have a wide variety to choose from for their mobile phone and internet needs. At present, there are more than 18 million mobile users in the country. As per the statistics of 2012, the mobile,

fixed line and CDMA services cover the 85% of the population and it is the reason that, the communication between people in different parts of the country has considerably increased. These numbers have considerably increased in the following years. All the mobile companies are also providing the international standard services of 3G and 4G. These services are unique in a sense that these services are not easily available in a number of developing countries of the world and Afghanistan has astonished the world with heavy investment in the field. Starting in 2006, the project of optical fiber cable network is also in progress. After the completion of this project, all the areas of the country will be connected to each other. The telecom sector also adds annual revenues of more than 140 million dollars to the economy, becoming one of the major contributors to the total government revenues. This contribution is critical in a sense that there is no established trend of paying taxes in the country and government suffers a lot to collect taxes. It is the reason why, our government still depends on its international donors to meet its expenses. It is hoped that with the expansion of this sector, the contributions will further increase and we might gradually reach to the stage of financial independence and sustainability. Until now, billions of dollars have been invested in the sector and it has become one of the most attractive sectors for the internal and external investors. Moreover, the telecom sector has generated more than 120,000 direct and indirect job opportunities throughout the country. This is remarkable in a sense that unemployment is the major reason of pessimism in the country and our youngsters leaving the country. With further expansion in the sector, there would be opportunities of thousand more jobs in the country that might release pressure for the jobs in the country. It would be unfair not to mention here the facilities of internet in the country. Internet is the most essential requirement of present day businesses and organizations in advanced world of communication. When large numbers of organizations started functioning in the country after the establishment of democracy in the country, the internet facilities were almost invisible. However, there came a rapid development in this field and now, the facility of internet is available in every corner of the country. It is the reason why, almost all the Afghans have access to internet and different social and news sites of the world. All these achievements have been made despite a number of difficulties in the country. The biggest challenge to the sector has come in form of insecurity, as mobile towers are located at all the corners of the country. The engineers and staff of telecom companies have worked at different dangerous sites to establish the network of communication in the country and they have ignored all the dangers in doing so.

Though Afghanistan is passing through its crucial stage when its democratic existence is fighting the challenges of insecurity and militancy but we are hopeful that these days would be over and with our commitment and perseverance, we will be able to witness the dawn of a new and peaceful day in our country.

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