THE INTERPRETER

They Were Journalists, and Women, and Targeted for Both

As Afghanistan enters a desperate chapter, with U.S. troops potentially on the way out, insurgents are pressing a deadly campaign to silence the media and keep women home.

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You can tell a lot about a country by the reasons its journalists get attacked.

In many places, the greatest dangers come from revealing the sensitive points where power, secrecy and corruption intersect: Stories about connections between cartels and politicians in Mexico, a bribery scandal in the Philippines and illicit actions by the governments of Egypt and Turkey have all led to journalists being imprisoned on trumped-up charges, attacked or even killed.

But in eastern Afghanistan, three young women who were shot to death on Tuesday outside of Enikass, the Jalalabad television station where they worked, were not investigative muckrakers. They did not expose corruption or criminal dealings. Mursal Wahidi, 25, Sadia Sadat, 20, and Shahnaz Raofi, 20, worked in a department that records voice-overs for foreign programs.

The Islamic State affiliate in the country, which has claimed responsibility for the shootings, said the journalists were attacked because they worked for "media stations loyal to the apostate Afghan government" — which is to say simply working in independent media at all. But the fact that they were women, methodically targeted in two separate attacks, was clearly a factor.

They were killed in a pitched moment for Afghanistan's fundamental struggle over the nature of the state itself. That fight pits the Western-supported government built along democratic lines against insurgent groups seeking a return to an extreme interpretation of Islamic rule — mainly a strengthening Taliban insurgency, but also smaller militant forces like the Islamic State.

Over the past 20 years of American military and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, the government has officially enshrined rights for women and minority groups that were not allowed during the Taliban's harsh rule until 2001. Now, those groups fear the Taliban will be back one way or another, as the American military prepares to withdraw and as the peace process between the Afghan government and Taliban limps along.

Even before any formal power-sharing deal, or a victory, the extremists are demanding, and violently enforcing, a new order — one in which human rights workers, journalists, judges and the rest of civil society are targeted as enemies.

Though the Islamic State is not working on the Taliban's behalf, and at times the two groups have been antagonistic, the group's violence has unquestionably furthered the terror that the Taliban are trying to instill with their targeted killings. It is not just to silence potential opposition, but to create a sense of inevitability about the insurgents' victory, and to increase pressure on the government to cave in to the Taliban's demands at the peace talks.

Journalists, and particularly female journalists, are becoming casualties in increasing numbers. Another woman, Malalai Maiwand, a 26-year-old broadcast journalist, was gunned down outside the same Jalalabad station in December.

Journalists hold placards during a protest against the killing of Malalai Maiwand, a 26-year-old broadcast journalist who was gunned down outside the Enikass TV station in December. Ghulamullah Habibi/EPA, via Shutterstock

“The three women here, another woman and her driver in December — so it’s hard not to say that women are facing immense risk,” said Aliya Iftikhar, the Asia researcher for the Committee to Protect Journalists, an international advocacy group.

Though she noted that she was unaware of the station receiving any threats specific to the murdered women or female employees generally, “Being a journalist in Afghanistan is a risk. There’s no other way to put it,” she said. “Even just going to work or walking home from work, as we saw happen yesterday, can pose a risk.”

Since 2018, more than 30 media employees and journalists have been killed in Afghanistan, according to a recent United Nations report. It has been particularly bad for them, and for other civil society figures, during an increase in targeted killings documented by The New York Times since peace negotiations started in September 2020.

“I feel like we’re living in a horror movie these days,” said Rada Akbar, a Kabul-based photojournalist and artist. “So many people left the country. A lot of people got killed. And everyone else who is in the city is just …” she trailed off, then continued. “Everyone is so silent. It’s very scary.”

‘A Warning to Me’

Mariam Alimi, a Kabul-based photojournalist, remembers the precise moment she heard that the three media workers in Jalalabad had been killed. “I was at my brother’s house,” she said. “I heard that three journalists had been killed, so I switched on the TV, and saw the story.”

The news, she said, was “a warning to me.” She travels throughout the country for her work, often alone. For years, she said, she felt safe enough doing so that she preferred to drive to assignments across the country rather than fly, which she considered a hassle. More recently, however, she has been threatened and followed by unknown men while on assignment. Her clients have canceled assignments and warned her not to travel.

And then came the killings on Tuesday, which felt like a message she couldn’t ignore.

The New York Times documented the deaths of at least 136 civilians and 168 security force members in such targeted killings and assassinations in 2020, more than nearly any other year of the war.

Those numbers include both men and women. But the killing of women usually gets more publicity, and has a particularly chilling effect.

Broadcasting at a radio station in Kandahar, last year. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

"These attacks are also obviously not just attacks on particular journalists only," said Kiran Nazish, the founder of the Coalition for Women in Journalism, an advocacy group that works to protect female journalists. "These attacks also are carried out so that everyone else in the media gets the message — basically to discourage women to work."

Violent groups often impose rules as a test of compliance for the populations they seek to control. Gangs and rebel groups all over the world extort payments from local residents, for instance, as a way to verify their obedience as well as to raise money.

For extremist groups like the Taliban and the Islamic State, which rely on narrow and unbending interpretations of Islam, preventing women from participating in public life is a way to demonstrate religious orthodoxy — and to roll back the clock to before 2001.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Improvements for women and the growth of a vibrant and independent press have both been a hallmark of the changes in Afghanistan since then. So, targeted attacks on female journalists like those in Jalalabad carry a doubly symbolic weight. And they are, truly, instilling the fear the insurgents seek.

A Speech for the Dead

Ms. Alimi's mother and brothers have begged her to leave journalism, and to stay home for her own safety, even leave the country, she said. But she is torn.

"If I want to move from this country, I'm losing my job. I lose everything I achieved in the last many years," she said. "And if I stay, I may lose my life."

The loss to journalism will be compounded if the next generation never enters the field in the first place.

"Many families, maybe they'll not let their daughters go to university to study journalism, maybe they will stop them from going into TV or broadcasting, or writing for a newspaper or magazine," said Ms. Alimi, who teaches photography in several regions of the country. "Because the risks, the stakes, are just becoming more and more."

“I know a lot of cases where women are being told not to work in the media anymore,” Ms. Nazish said. “Even though sometimes women journalists — reporters, photographers, producers, writers — these women who work in the media, are also breadwinners in their family. Which is why they are allowed to work. But they’re facing a lot of challenges and their families are, you know, concerned about them continuing to work for the media.”

Rada Akbar, a Kabul-based photojournalist and artist, second from left, at her annual art exhibition in Kabul on Friday. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times

The impact of that would go beyond individual careers. Journalism can shape culture, and journalists shape journalism; if any group or perspective is driven out, or independent journalism is crushed, that will have an effect on Afghanistan as a nation.

Other effects are already here. Ms. Akbar, the photojournalist, does a yearly art exhibition called “Superwomen,” honoring prominent women from Afghanistan’s history. This year’s was set to open on March 8, International Women’s Day, but she has canceled the opening.

People cannot take the risk of coming to such an exhibit, she said. But even if they could, she said, “A lot of those people who would want to come to the exhibition are gone. Some of them are killed. And a lot of them just left the country.”

“So I’m just making an opening for the recent victims of these attacks. Printing their photos with their names, and candles in the exhibition hall, and then reading them my speech,” she said. “This is the tragedy that we’re going through, that I’m going to have to hold the exhibition for the deceased.”

“I don’t know how we can keep our hope alive.”

Fatima Faizi contributed reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan.