

New Taliban Guidelines Stir Fear About the Future of Press Freedom

The directives for journalists include rules against publishing topics in conflict with Islam or insulting to national personalities.



By Carlotta Gall

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Concerns are growing at the increased constraints the Taliban government has placed on the news media in Afghanistan, after officials issued a new framework of rules for journalists that critics say open the door for censorship and repression.

Qari Muhammad Yousuf Ahmadi, the interim director of the Government Media and Information Center and a longtime Taliban spokesman, unveiled 11 rules for journalists this week. They include directives against publishing topics that are in conflict with Islam or insulting to national personalities, and also instruct journalists to produce news reports in coordination with the government media office.

The once-vibrant media industry in Afghanistan has been in free fall since the Taliban seized control last month. Many Afghan journalists fled the country, fearing repression and violence from the new rulers, while dozens more have gone into hiding and are still seeking a way out of Afghanistan.

More than 100 local media companies and radio stations around the country have stopped operating, having either been closed down, taken over by the Taliban or forced out of business for lack of funding, according to local media. Some of the most prominent newspapers have had to cease print operations and now publish only online, amid the country's sharp economic downturn.

The American-based press freedom organization, the Committee to Protect Journalists, has been focused on the emergency response to help Afghan reporters and to track violence against journalists by the Taliban.

"Journalists are just frightened," said Steven Butler, who manages the organization's Asia program. He said the organization had been receiving hundreds of emails from journalists asking for help.

In early September in Kabul, the Taliban rounded up scores of demonstrators and journalists covering demonstrations against the new government, subjecting them to abuse in overcrowded jails, according to journalists who were present. Photos showed the backs of two detained reporters covered with bruises and gashes from being whipped with cables, prompting an international outcry.



Zabiullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, at the Tuesday news conference in Kabul. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

More than a dozen Afghan journalists and media workers interviewed by The New York Times earlier this month described living with a sense of fear and self-censorship — while struggling to deliver news despite the Taliban releasing very little information.

The new rules announced by the Taliban have done little to calm the nervousness of members of the media and advocates for journalists.

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The press freedom organization, Reporters Without Borders, called the rules “spine-chilling” in a statement on Thursday, and warned that although some of them — such as calls for truth and balance — might seem reasonable, as a whole the rules were “extremely dangerous because they open the way to censorship and persecution.”

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.

In its statement, the group noted that while some clauses were similar to the wording in Afghanistan's national media law, the Taliban had dropped any mention of conforming with international standards and press-freedom conventions.

The Taliban did not respond to a request for comment.

Some of the rules could be used coercively, Christophe Deloire, the Reporters Without Borders secretary general, said in the statement. "They bode ill for the future of journalistic independence and pluralism in Afghanistan."

Mr. Butler said the vagueness of the rules, and their lack of standards, would allow them to be misused.

"You don't really know what it means or how it will be interpreted," he said. "A lot of countries across the region have rules that are similarly vague, and they are used on a regular basis to go after journalists, to put them into jail."

"Are we going to assume that the Taliban is going to be better behaved than these other governments that claim to be democracies?" he said. "It is hard to be optimistic about that one."

Wali Arian contributed reporting.

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