

## **Taliban takeover in Afghanistan spells dark times for journalists and free speech**

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Afghan journalists and other media workers are among those known to be in danger of violent reprisals and penalties as the Taliban takeover Afghanistan goes on without hindrance. Most at risk are those who have worked with western media or have benefitted from foreign funding of a modern media and information sector in the country over the past twenty years.

Right now, hundreds of journalists and their close family members are among countless thousands of Afghans scrambling to obtain safe passage on flights out of the country amid scenes of chaos and sometimes violence. The shocking lack of foresight or preparation by the USA, the UK and other governments in the US-led coalition is having dire consequences for many of those journalists.

So far western governments have been unequal to the tasks of issuing large numbers of foreign visas all at once, securing the airport and safely evacuating those approved for travel. The west failed the crucial challenge of establishing a stable and lasting democratic form of government in Afghanistan. That failure risks being compounded by a many-sided humanitarian disaster there.

Multiple reports speak of journalists and broadcasters around the country being attacked or going into hiding. Women media workers are in special need of protection against dire punishments and sexual crimes. The International Federation of Journalists estimates that forced closures of media outlets have already left over one thousand Afghan media workers jobless.

Reporters Without Borders has called on the UN Security Council to meet in extraordinary session to address the crisis resulting from the fall of Kabul and the situation of journalists in particular.

The Taliban's public assurances, including at a televised press conference on Wednesday, that media freedom and independence will be respected, have been met with scepticism or disbelief.

Ironically, despite numerous killings and other targeted attacks against journalists in recent years, the combined efforts of western NGOs and Afghan journalists have resulted in what Freedom House in its Freedom in the World 2021 survey <https://freedomhouse.org/country/afghanistan/freedom-world/2021> called a "vibrant media sector", with many TV, radio and newspaper outlets that were largely uncensored and capable of carrying a broad range of views. Almost overnight, all that is at risk of being snuffed out.

Now is not the time for recriminations, but for turning solidarity and expressions of goodwill into practical help for Afghan journalists who showed their own society the incalculable value of independent and diverse media, and of exercising free speech even in the face of intolerance and threats.

The AEJ supports the IFJ's initiative to set up an Afghanistan Solidarity Fund <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/afghanistan-ifj-launches-international-solidarity-campaign-as-taliban-violence-threatens-journalist.html> to channel urgent support to those journalists by all means possible.

And European governments must act immediately to provide emergency humanitarian visas, refugee status and new opportunities abroad to Afghan journalists who need a helping hand from the outside world at their time of extreme need.