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## Afghan Journalists Alarmed by Media Decree

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**Officials say they just want to prod media into raising standards, but those in the industry warn of censorship risk.**

A decree by Afghan president Hamid Karzai ordering government to improve the quality of the country's media has created fears that the government will try to censor the press and broadcasters.

Karzai gave the information and culture ministry two months to come up with an action plan to impose "minimum quality standards" on both state-run and private media outlets. This will involve, among other things, ensuring that their output respects Afghan traditions and customs, and upholds the national languages – including by cutting out alien foreign words.

The instructions are part of a wide-ranging, 164-point decree setting out how the Afghan authorities are to go about improving governance and rule of law, combating corruption, and making the country more self-reliant in economic terms. The decree comes a month after Karzai addressed parliament and corruption and stop pursuing "compromise" policies.

Journalists and other media experts have raised concern about Karzai's directive, arguing that its loose definitions of the shortcomings that needed to be addressed in the media would create scope for blanket repression.

“Everything that is done with regard to the media has to be in line with the law. Ad hoc decisions should not be imposed,” Danish Karokhel, director of the Pajhwok news agency said. “Given what I know of the information and culture ministry, I believe it will exploit the situation to place numerous hurdles in the way of freedom of expression and media development.” “

Since the Taleban was ousted in 2001, Afghanistan has seen significant advances in media freedom.

While the government always cites this as one of its major achievements, its recent behaviour has worried media activists. A month ago, the information and culture ministry proposed amendments to the 2009 media law that faced fierce resistance because they were seen as so restrictive. In the end, the ministry was forced to scrap the changes.

Fazel Rahman Orya, a journalist and a political commentator, suspects that moves to tighten controls are retaliation for embarrassing media exposes of government incompetence and corruption.

“That is why he [Karzai] and his ruling team are determined to suffocate the media and rule the country however they want for the next two years without facing criticism from anyone,” Oria said.

Abdul Hamid Mobarez, head of Afghanistan’s National Union of Journalists, warns that Karzai’s decree is likely to result in restricted freedom of expression.

“If the presidential office or any other government institution has issues with some media outlet, they must state that, and discuss it with the specific media outlet as the law prescribes. We cannot accept such ambiguous directives.”

Mobarez and others argue that the decree rides roughshod over the existing media law, passed in 2009.

“If the government needs to restrict freedom of expression, it must give a clear reason for such a decision,” Mobarez said.

As for instructions to bar the use of “alien foreign terminology”, Mobarez said this was a matter that should properly be resolved by a forum of linguists rather than officials.

The media law bans censorship and enshrines freedom of expression, access to information, and the free functioning of media organisations “without inference or restriction by the governing authorities”.

The constitution also describes freedom of expression as an inalienable right, and grants Afghan citizens the right to publish their views without prior consent from government.

Freelance reporter Nawid Aryafar said Karzai must be unaware of these legal provisions.

“If he was familiar with the law, he would not have issued this decree on the media, since it’s in breach of both the constitution and the media law,” Aryafar said. “Isn’t that criminal and unaccountable?”

Sediq Tawhidi, head of the Nai group, which works in support of open media in Afghanistan, said that the decree was full of dangerously ambiguous language which needed to be clarified, and invested the information ministry with powers that are unlawful and unconstitutional.

Terms like quality control and minimum standards were so vague that they could easily be misused to pressure media outlets and journalists, he said, noting that sections of the Afghan government were hostile to free expression, and this had already created “numerous problems for independent media and journalists”.

Siamak Herawi, a spokesman for President Karzai, attempted to dispel fears about the intentions behind the decree.

“This is not a military order,” he said. “Whatever policy the information and culture ministry formulates will be based on consensus and consultations with media institutions, and will be within the law.”

Herawi added, “I think the Afghan media enjoy a level of freedom that is unparalleled in the region, but this should not be abused by unaccountable media.”

Karokhel pointed out that one of the central planks of the 2009 law was the creation of a special council to shape media policy. The information ministry never established the body, and Karokhel argued that “certain circles are trying to exploit its absence to restrict freedom of expression”.

Herawi said the only reason the council had not yet come into being was that the information ministry was in dispute with civil society groups about what it should look like.

“That leaves the ministry as the sole institution that currently defends freedom of expression and implements the media law,” he added.