

Mr. Hamid Karzai
Presidential candidate
Kabul
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Paris, 30 July 2009

Dear Mr. Karzai,

Reporters Without Borders would like to refer you to the situation of freedom of expression in your country three weeks before the presidential election in which you are a candidate. We sincerely hope you take up the issue of press freedom in your campaign and specifically pledge to ensure that it becomes a fixture of everyday life for Afghans. Incorporating concrete proposals regarding press freedom into your presidential programme would be a significant political gesture.

As you know, the threats to Afghan and foreign journalists in Afghanistan do not come from the Taliban alone. As well as the Taliban, who have never stopped threatening to kill journalists who do not bow to their demands, there are now also criminal groups. Fewer and fewer journalists are venturing into the south and east of the country, which are becoming extremely unstable and are escaping the control of the authorities. These regions have become news black holes. There has also been an increase in attempts by the security forces to intimidate Afghan journalists.

Reporters Without Borders hopes that, in the course of your election campaign, you will publicly express your concern about this recent wave of press freedom violations in Afghanistan. These violations are unfortunately not the work of isolated individuals but are instigated by influential people of various political backgrounds.

If you are re-elected as president, we expect you to give an undertaking to the Afghan people and the international community to resolve the most important press freedom cases. If you do not, your country risks losing the confidence of journalists and the support of international public opinion. This would complicate the task of foreign governments, including those of the European Union, which support your administration financially, militarily and politically.

We ask you to relaunch the investigations into murders and physical attacks on journalists. The continuing impunity in so many cases is unacceptable. The failure of the police and judicial authorities to arrest the murderers of *Peace Radio* director **Zakia Zaki**, *BBC* reporter **Abdul Rohani** and **Jawed Ahmad**, a fixer for Canadian news media, violates the Afghan government's international commitments to respect the rule of law. This impunity encourages more violence, especially against women journalists. On 30 July, for example, five journalists were beaten by police officers in Herat while investigating the death of a civilian at the hands of the police.

As a candidate for the highest government office, we ask you to pledge to release **Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh**, a young journalist who was unjustly sentenced to 20 years in prison on a blasphemy charge for downloading an article from the Internet. More than 1 million people around the world have already signed a petition for his release. The confirmation that he was tortured by

members of the security forces has cast doubt on their ability to respect international standards in this regard.

You should respond to this case by publicly opposing the politicisation of the charge of blasphemy. It is vital that article 130 of the Afghan constitution should stop being used to prosecute people for the views they express.

Afghanistan needs a new press law that gives more guarantees for media freedom. This press law has been under discussion for years but its promulgation has been blocked for political reasons. We ask you to fully promulgate it as soon as you are re-elected. A lot remains to be done as regards legislation. We ask you to support proposals for the decriminalization of press offences, the transformation of the state media into public services and a law on access to information.

We think it is important that you should give your personal support to journalists who are threatened, especially women journalists, who continue to suffer a great deal of discrimination. A plan to improve work conditions in the media is essential. Why not pass a law that improves the situation of journalists as regards contracts and salaries – a precondition for improving editorial independence?

How can the government and international community hope to combat the corruption and drug trafficking that is eating away at the state apparatus without a free press that is capable of exposing all the aspects of misgovernance? How can you combat Taliban propaganda if the government is incapable of defending free speech?

Never in Afghanistan's modern history has the population had such unrestricted access to news and information produced by Afghans for Afghans. We urge you to seize this historic opportunity, if you are re-elected president, to strengthen media freedom in a lasting manner. We count on you to give a clear undertaking to ensure that journalists are no longer subjected to judicial and religious harassment. The Afghan constitution protects press freedom but the inquisitorial and violent climate towards journalists is endangering what has been achieved and is encouraging self-censorship.

We are sending you a copy of the report of the fact-finding visit that Reporters Without Borders made to Afghanistan last February so that you may be informed of its conclusions and recommendations.

We are also sending this letter to the other leading candidates in the 20 August presidential elections and we undertake to publish any reply we receive from you.

I am confident that you will live up to our expectations.

Respectfully,



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