

Life and death in party city

Heidi Kingstone

A great deal of table-hopping goes on most days at L'Atmosphere, the popular French restaurant on Forth Street in the upmarket Kabul neighbourhood of Qala-e-Fattulah. It is one of those ex-pat places where everyone knows everyone. In the summer, its large green garden is heavy with the scent of those famous Afghan roses that grow in great abundance. When the weather turns warm the fearless swim in the cold aqua-coloured water of its sub-Olympic size pool, or just hang around drinking wine and smoking, quite a contrast to what goes on outside the entrance, heavily barricaded to prevent ordinary Afghans from entering. In March this year, when five Talibs were released in exchange for Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo, the table-hopping accelerated. In a venue usually populated by journalists hard at work on laptops or engaged in earnest conversation about Afghanistan, everyone agreed on this night that as a result of the Italian Government's action the price on journalists' heads had just gone up. Perhaps it had. But as the story unravelled it turned out that Afghan journalist Ajmal Naqshbandi paid the highest price. He was later beheaded.

For a foreign correspondent, Afghanistan is a gift of a place to work. Stories seem to fall from the sky, and access to people is often much easier than in countries where the hierarchy is established and entrenched and movement far more restricted – in Iraq, for example. Afghans not only like to have their pictures taken, which is both delightful and peculiar at the same time, but they also are generally happy to talk. Compared with Baghdad, from where I reported in 2003/4, there is an entirely different feel and accessibility. Kabul is party city. You can head from one reception to another, from the bar at La Cantina to the Red, Hot, Sizzlin' restaurant, the UN or one of the nightly soirées hosted by some other official organisation. It makes

networking fun and easy. Whatever kind of socialising you are looking for – with fellow journalists, the NGO crowd, the military, diplomats or various mercenaries – it’s all on hand.

In the four months I was based in Kabul, during which I embarked on occasional wanderings around the country, including spending a few hours in Kandahar and trips to Bamiyan and Dai Kundi, I never felt remotely in danger. Maybe I was walking in a bubble-like environment; after all, this is a war zone. Now and then I would look over my shoulder, or ask a question about safety, but having largely stayed away from the conflict zones of Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzghan, I felt safe enough. For Afghan journalists, unfortunately used to a climate of violence, this is not the case. On May 31, shortly before I left, 22-year-old news presenter Shokiba Sanga Amaaj from Shamshad TV was murdered in her house. Threats to journalists are common. When I went to visit Saad Mohseni, the Afghan-born entrepreneur who had spent 20 years in Australia before founding Tolo TV and is seen as Afghanistan’s Rupert Murdoch, he joked that the first thing you say to someone is: “I’m going to kill you.” Then he added: “We are a violent people.” He wasn’t kidding. After the murder of Naqshbandi, journalists in Kandahar, Helmand, Ghazni and Zabul provinces received death threats from the Taliban. Lawlessness threatens every journalist’s right to freedom of expression. The consequences of what we write in our free Western societies are rarely dire or matters of life and death. In order to tell the truth in Afghanistan, journalists often have to relocate for a period. In some cases they can never return to a region if they have written a story critical of the Taliban or the Government.

A smile brings complaints

On June 5 journalist Zakia Zaki, who ran the private broadcaster Peace Radio, was killed by gunmen at her home. Last year three journalists were murdered and there were 50 recorded incidents involving beatings, arrests and threats. Some journalists are now limiting their movements and excising self-censorship. Afghanistan has a deeply ultra-traditional culture, one that is unlikely to change in the near future. Note the women journalists who have been murdered and threatened. While others appear regularly on TV, which is a positive trend, the country is so conservative the very fact that women simply smile within the sight of men can provoke complaints.

I am not sure that in all my travels around the world I have ever come

across anywhere quite so strange as Afghanistan. Perhaps this is why it has cast a spell over foreigners for so many centuries. Something about it traps your soul, but it is difficult to explain why. Kabul is not only desperately poor, but visiting Afghanistan is like taking a trip back in time. I arrived in February to find Kabul covered in mud. It dripped from everything, from the sky, from the branches on the trees, and it shot upwards from puddles. When the weather changed, the mud turned to dust, which invaded everywhere – eyes, throat, even the darkest recesses of cupboards. As everyone who has ever been there will tell you, the percentage of faecal matter in the air, due in part to open sewers in a capital sited 1,800 metres above sea level, is frighteningly high. Most Afghans want to leave. Foreigners, like myself, are desperate to stay despite, especially for women, the hardships and restrictions. Life is intense and the work satisfying. As a foreign journalist, there is much to say.

The media situation is mixed. A press, radio and TV momentum has built up that may be difficult to stop, even though the threat from institutions, official intimidation, impending legislation, insurgents, lack of funding, past history and the inhibiting culture are ever present. After almost 30 years of conflict, starting with the Soviet invasion of 1979 and through the civil war fought by the Mujahideen, and the rule of the Taliban that ended in 2001, institutions, much like the country itself, were left in ruins. The middle-class had fled, the universities closed. There was no educational system and no capacity for learning. This remains almost as big a problem as corruption, which isn't to say there aren't many talented and capable Afghans, or a hunger for information. The first non-essential items people tend to buy are \$50 TV sets and \$30 generators – TV ownership is running far ahead of the access to electricity.

Afghans have become great survivors, some say opportunists. There is a famous story about a communist who, within days, had grown a beard and become a Mujahideen, who within a few more days grew a longer beard and became Taliban, and who within hours of this transformation shaved off his beard to become a “technocrat”. There is a great hunger for news, because survival may depend on it. (Based on surveys and focus groups conducted by Tolo TV, which has 60 per cent of the market share, people can tell the difference between propaganda and news.) A recent nationwide phenomenon is the growth of daily, weekly and monthly publications, but a lot of what you read is defamatory and there are no facts, no balance, just insults. When I went to Bamiyan, the province in the north where the Taliban destroyed the

ancient Buddhas, I spoke to the governor, a feisty and impressive woman called Habiba Sarabi. Dressed conservatively, as all Afghan women are, she lamented the fact that her opponents could hurl insults at her through the media without any restrictions or redress. There is also some simply dreadful journalism. For example, this newspaper story of a suspected suicide bomber: “He [an investigating officer] said: ‘After searching the suspect, we came to know that he was a retard’.” Another story explained graphically that “the whores were arrested from the restaurants where they were doing prostitution and where wine was also sold. He would not say to which countries the sluts belonged”.

Perhaps the Government shouldn't fear the media as much as it does. It feels the need to control what is put out because the country is still on a war footing. Neither the Government nor the public understand what freedom of the press means. Why would they understand the concept, any more than they understand Western democracy? The idea that it is the responsibility of the fledgling media to hold the Government accountable for its actions and also for the media to be held accountable for what they write is unfathomable. Afghan journalists are intimidated and are vulnerable in ways that Western journalists can only imagine, so independence, freedom and diversity are extremely fragile concepts and are likely to remain so until – or if – the security of the individual is stabilised.

Threat to press freedom

As Government ranks are stuffed full of former warlords, drug barons and many other unsavoury characters, it is hardly surprising that they do not react well to reports about corruption. There is still a feeling within government that it can control information. Yet until last year Afghanistan's media faced what seemed a positive future. Law reforms were introduced in 2004, guaranteeing freedom of expression and replacing the existing restrictive Afghan press law of 1943. But in June this year Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of parliament – literally house of the people – passed a new and controversial media bill (although it may yet need to go to the upper house, the Meshrano Jirga, and obtain presidential assent before it becomes law). This bill has already undergone many changes due to protests from journalists and MPs who rebuffed the original broad-ranging restrictions on media content. But the media licences necessary for TV, radio and printed publications to operate will continue to be issued by the Ministry of the

Interior and Culture and it is feared that these could be withheld from anywhere the Ministry deems to be anti-government. The law also demands balanced reporting. It's a vague enough requirement to make people such as Mohseni worry about possible prosecution. Does balance mean that if you have an exclusive interview and the interviewee criticises someone, there must be a right of reply?

But many believe the flourishing of the media is one of the real Afghan success stories of the past five or six years. That is certainly Chris Alexander's view. He is one of two deputy special representatives of the UN's Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, and at 37 already Canada's former ambassador to Afghanistan. Sitting in UNAMA's Compound B in Kabul he claimed that when history is written, the vibrancy of the independent media will be found to have played a pivotal role in the parliamentary and presidential elections. He points to the 250 media outlets in this country, some tiny, some absolutely microscopic and not always economically sustainable, but compared with the 10 or 15 that existed under the Taliban, extremely lively.

Statistics about the media in Afghanistan are notoriously hard to come by and media outlets, often operated by one man or woman, open and close regularly. When I was there, some long-term Afghan watchers suggested that failed-states-on-the-rebound need first to concentrate on political stability and physical security if the rebound isn't to be extremely temporary. Some ask which is more important, the survival of an Afghan free media or the survival of the Afghan nation-state? As it is, the international community has poured huge resources into training journalists, producers, photographers, editors. Tolo takes people at 20 or 21, some even at 17, and they get on-the-job training. Hopefully this will break the mould of Soviet-style, parrot-like reporting. People from the BBC have also worked with Tolo, and intellectuals and academics monitor everything. "We try to employ people who are brave and intelligent, who are eloquent and have common sense," says Mohseni. "Everything else then falls in to place." But many international agencies, once gung-ho about training and funding, have lost interest after realising the media companies in which they invested were a long way off becoming sustainable. There is still no overall structure in place for the development of the media and without international funding many papers and radio stations could collapse. And journalists are still threatened by the powerful and often bribed to take a partisan line.

When I was talking to Mohseni in his Kabul office, with the requisite number of multiple TV stations on screens in the background, the

BlackBerry beeping and telephone pinging, he made an interesting comment. “It’s a must now for people to be telling the truth. Our credibility is one of the reasons why we are successful. Bad things happen in our society, and we force the Government to face up to the challenges. We can’t lie to our people even if it goes against Afghan culture.” As honour and respect are the two paramount characteristics that define Afghan culture, honesty and direct speaking are difficult and such inhibition pervades the media, too. Perhaps it is time for Afghanistan, as a nation, to change. If the media can impact on how Afghans express themselves, establishing more honesty, it will be a good thing.

If Afghanistan’s journalism is to flourish – and it’s a big if – among the issues it has to address are convincing the police and other law enforcement bodies that the media should be protected, not muzzled or manipulated. Chris Alexander believes the Government has to improve its strategic communications and resist the temptation to blame the messenger, and that a credible public broadcaster needs to emerge, the funding and manipulation of media from abroad decreased, and a solid advertising market to emerge on the back of a flourishing private sector. All this is still very much a work in progress. In this insecure situation, the media face a similar challenge to almost anyone and anything else in this country – simply to survive.

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