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## With friends like these, who needs the Taliban?

By Jean MacKenzie

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**Afghanistan's Council of Religious Scholars calls for a harsh crackdown on independent media on grounds of "immorality."**

KABUL — Those who think that Afghanistan's problems began and ended with the Taliban should take a look at a recent declaration by the country's Council of Religious Scholars, known here as the Ulema Shura.

The Shura meets with President Hamid Karzai on a bi-weekly basis to advise him on religious matters. At the latest session, which took place on Thursday morning, just before Karzai flew off to Italy for the country's 150th birthday party, the esteemed mullahs presented the president with a statement calling for, among other things, the closure of some of the country's most progressive media.

TOLO TV has been in the mullahs' sights before, most often for broadcasting foreign soap operas, irreverent coverage of the government, or for showing women who sing and at times actually move to the music when they perform.

The Shura is now criticizing the television station for "immorality," and demanded "for the last time" that Karzai close down TOLO for its "anti-religious" broadcasts. If the president refuses to heed their call, they say, they will mobilize the public for mass protests.

In addition, the Shura singled out the country's largest independent newspaper, the 8 a.m. Daily, for its "anti-national and anti-religious" publications. It further called on the president to press charges against the paper for libel.

The newspaper's offense was to cover a trip to northern Afghanistan by a human rights organization and a women's rights activist. The delegation visited girls' madrassas in Kunduz and Takhar provinces, and found that the parents of these students were concerned about the radicalizing influence the schools were having on their daughters.

This was too much for the Ulema Shura, who decreed that there could be nothing wrong with religious education:

"(The newspaper) is saying that religious education is opening the way for social violence and is dangerous for the security of the country," said the mullahs in their statement. "The Ulema Shura strongly supports the expansion of religious education for girls, who are the future mothers of the country. It strongly condemns such affronts and considers them a sign of animosity against Islam."

The charge of "anti-Islamic activity" is not a light one — in Afghanistan it can carry the death penalty. There have been several celebrated cases over the years.

In 2005, the editor of a magazine on women's rights was arrested for daring to publish materials questioning some of the restrictions that Islam places on women. These include the legal stipulation that a woman's testimony in court is counted as only half as good as a man's, or that a daughter can inherit only half as much as a son. He also criticized some of Islam's harsher punishments, such as stoning for adultery.

The editor, Ali Mohaqeq Nasab, was sentenced to two years in prison, but was freed after three months when the case attracted international attention.

Parwez Kambakhsh, a young journalism student who circulated materials downloaded from the Internet that were critical of Islam and the Prophet, was arrested in 2007 and condemned to death. The sentence was later commuted to 20 years in prison.

Kambakhsh became a symbol for those who questioned the sincerity of the Afghan government's commitment to freedom of speech. Journalists' organizations, human rights groups, international organizations and embassies brought great pressure to bear on Karzai, who was heard to complain that he could not attend a meeting without being asked about Kambakhsh.

Nevertheless, the young student spent nearly two years in prison before he was finally released and allowed to leave the country.

So Afghanistan's media moguls have a right to be worried.

TOLO, of course, has withstood more pressure than this, and has even been raided by the police on occasion.

But 8 a.m. Daily's owner, Sanjar Sohail, seems to be feeling a bit unsettled by the whole affair.

He termed the Shura's comments "a significant threat against independent and open media in Afghanistan," and added that he expected that this would not be the end of the matter.

"We have determined that this is an organized action against this newspaper and other media outlets," he said. "We believe that it will not be the only action against media freedom."

The mullahs also demanded that the government investigate how media outlets like TOLO and 8 a.m. Daily pay their bills.

"The Ulema Shura ... sends a categorical request to the responsible officials to ... disclose the financial sources of such affiliated and anti-national publications," read the statement.

This is very likely a move directed at the international community, whose support for independent media has grown over the years.

Given Afghanistan's fragile economy, it can be difficult for some outlets to gain a footing in the constantly shifting market. International donors like the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have given many radio and television stations, including TOLO, a leg up over the years. They have also provided running costs and other financial incentives to newspapers and news agencies.

The media, in fact, has been one of the success stories of international development, with hundreds of media outlets owing their existence to start-up grants from one donor or the other.

Some become great hits, like TOLO, which stands as the flagship of a powerful media holding company; others barely scrape by, or are forced to seek support from various power brokers, leading to an increasing politicization of the media scene.

But 8 a.m. Daily and TOLO are unquestionably two of the most important media organizations in Afghanistan, whose independence, both from the government and from foreign influence, has not been widely questioned.

It is, of course, a far cry from this slap on the wrist to the dark days of the Taliban, when television was banned and radio carried only the Voice of Sharia, with Quran readings and religious instruction. There is no whip-wielding Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice to punish those whose beards are too short or whose hair is too long.

At least not yet.

But if the Shura's demarche is allowed to stand, can the religious police be far behind?