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The American Way: Spreading Democracy to Afghanistan, One Journalist's Arrest at a Time Dave Lindorff and Linn Washington

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The American Way: Spreading Democracy to Afghanistan, One Journalist's Arrest at a Time

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September 27, 2010 - US-led forces in Afghanistan sure did a bang-up job this week at promoting the concept of Western "democracy."

This Can't Be Happening, September 27, 2010

US-led forces in Afghanistan sure did a bang-up job this week at promoting the concept of Western "democracy."

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The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the puppet intelligence agency of the Afghan government, between them, arrested and held three journalists. Rahmatullah Nekzad, a freelance reporter for Al Jazeera and the Associated Press, Mohammed Nader, a staff correspondent and cameraman for Al Jazeera, and Hojatullah Mojadadi, an Afghan local radio station

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the puppet intelligence agency of the Afghan government, between them, arrested and held three journalists. Rahmatullah Nekzad, a freelance reporter for Al Jazeera and the Associated Press, Mohammed Nader, a staff correspondent and cameraman for Al Jazeera, and Hojatullah Mojadadi, an Afghan local radio station manager, were all held without charge for the "crime" of allegedly having developed contacts with the Taliban. Nekzada and Nader were held by US forces for three days. Mojadadi was held by Afghan authorities for six days.

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The three were finally released thanks to international pressure and following demands for the release of the two NATO-held journalists made by Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

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The US military was upset with the fact that AP and Al Jazeera stringer Nekzad had developed contacts with Taliban forces. Actually, in the initial press announcement from NATO forces, they said that he was a "suspected Taliban media and propaganda facilitator, who participated in filming election attacks." That is to say, he managed to get over to the "other side" in a guerrilla war, to let the outside world see what is going on in Afghanistan. Nader was accused of propagandizing for the Taliban.

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Rahmatulla Nekzad, AP reporter arrested by US forces in Afghanistan for doing his job.

Explaining their detention of the two men, the ISAF said, "The insurgents use propaganda, often delivered through news organizations, as a way to influence and, in many cases, intimidate the Afghan population. Coalition and Afghan forces have a responsibility to interdict the activities of these insurgent propaganda networks."

Afghan government sources gave no explanation for the detention of radio station manager Mojadadi, and eventually all three men were released with no charges even filed against them.

The timing of these arrests--right in the midst of the country's highly touted but thoroughly corrupt legislative election, which the Taliban were seeking to disrupt--makes it clear what the US was really up to: preventing honest coverage of the whole sham, which is largely for US domestic consumption to make it look like all the money and blood is accomplishing something.

This is, of course, not the first time that US forces or US-led forces have arrested journalists in Afghanistan. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a number of journalists have been arrested or detained in Afghanistan over the course of the nine-year war. Some have been quickly released, but others have suffered grim fates which are surely meant to send a message to other journalists in the country. Jawed Ahmad, a correspondent for Canada's CTV, was held by the US in the harsh and mysterious confines of the prison at Bagram Airbase for 11 months, only to be released finally without charge. Sami al-Haz, another Al Jazeera correspondent, was detained after being picked up crossing the border from Pakistan into Afghanistan in December 2001, and was held for six years as a US prisoner without charge in Guantanamo, before also being released without charge. (Ahmad was murdered after his release from Bagram in an as yet unsolved drive-by shooting).

Apparently, if you don't report stories from the American point of view in Afghanistan, if you make the effort to get at the "other side" of the story, and especially if you work for the news organization Al-Jazeera, you are potentially viewed as an enemy, and can be subject to arrest and detention without charge. Or worse: Remember in the Iraq War, the US bombed the Al Jazeera office in Baghdad in the early days of the invasion, killing several members of the staff, and Bush even considered blowing up the organization's headquarters in the United Arab Emirates?

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This is the democracy we are bringing to Afghanistan?

Maybe the US military is so used to dealing with slack-jawed skills with press passes in the Pentagon press room, and with embedded American journalists in the war zone ready to parrot the party line fed to them by cheery Pentagon handlers, and to accept censorship, that the people in command don't even really understand what journalists are supposed to do, which is ferret out the truth, and present the full picture to readers or viewers. On the other hand, as we can see with the arrest and detention in Kuwait of military whistleblower Bradley Manning, telling the truth is a crime when those in authority are committing mass murder. Constant lying is central to military culture.

When you come right down to it, most of what passes for journalism today in the US corporate media is propaganda. Those of us who are still being real journalists, like the members of this little newspaper, in the view of the military, the FBI, much of the political establishment, and maybe even much of the American public, are traitors.

Still, it is pathetic to think that we are being told by our government that America is fighting a war in Afghanistan to promote democracy in that country, when those forces are arresting journalists who are just doing their job of reporting on the conflict.

It's not even as though these were American reporters who were being arrested. I mean, okay, if you're an American journalist, and you go out and befriend some Taliban fighters, and then go along with them and film them as they ambush and kill some US troops, I can at least see how US forces might see you as being a bit treasonous. But Al Jazeera correspondents are not Americans, and their news organization, based in the UAE, is completely neutral in the Afghan conflict. It's as if you had Spanish or Swiss reporters covering World War II, when their countries were neutral. You would expect their reporters to be working both sides of the battle lines.

Arresting journalists for just doing their job, whether overseas or here at home, is a bad sign. It is another step into the abyss of totalitarianism.

I just walked past a car the other day that had a sticker on it saying: "Afghan War Veteran." A second sticker, decorated in desert camouflage, featured the line, "The US military: Their courage gives you your freedoms."

I don't think so.

:: Article nr. 70188 sent on 27-sep-2010 17:52 ECT

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