Then came January 22 and the news, which shocked the world, behind closed doors the Council of Religious Scholars, sentenced Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh to death for downloading and distributing a "blasphemous" article "disseminating defamatory comments about Islam". Under the most amazing circumstances and with a decision against the spirit of the constitution a young man would die, simply for expressing an opinion and thinking freely, civil liberties are at stake in Afghanistan and as some might say they are as good as gone with this verdict. There were isolated scenes of jubilation around Afghanistan and for the most part the religious leaders had managed to control what the media thought of the topic. Journalists and human rights organisations around the world were up in arms, they looked to Karzai for a response, but till date he has remained mum on the topic. His refusal to deal with the issue publicly and internationally had only fed fodder to the religious hardliners; the same people who have helped him consolidate his power in a crumbling nation.

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At the same time many facts have been skewered as reports out of Afghanistan have claimed that he wrote the article in question. What is interesting to note is that he may simply have been used as a pawn to pressure his brother Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimi. Kambakhsh's brother is a noted journalist who recently published an article implicating an Afghan legislator in a series of killings and kidnappings. His article did not go down well with the authorities and it is thought that the charges brought against his brother were done to silence him. In defiance to the ludicrous charges Ibrahimi did not back down, like a true dedicated believer in the freedom of speech and expression he stood by all his critical stories and his brother. But that could not stop a disturbing series of events that refused to settle, soon after the first verdict was given people were looking to higher forms of authority to repel the verdict. A week after he was handed a death sentence his verdict was upheld and motion was passed confirming it all.

The furore surrounding the case had not died down and will not till it is resolved, but the pressure the international community is putting on Afghanistan and Karzai is more than likely to have the opposite of the desired effect. Karzai has increasingly distanced himself from his NATO allies by kicking out Irish and British diplomats as well as his standoffish presence at Davos, he has drifted from his international power bases to national ones which are strikingly similar to the Taleban and it is no coincidence that recently there has been an increasing amount of Tabean activity in the country. With an election looming in the near future he may just keep shutting out the west by continuing to back his religious hardliners in local government. The result of Karzai's mood swings are that civil liberties are at an all time low in the nation and there are reports of rising fundamentalism which poses a treat to the freedoms of thought, speech and the press.

Zia Bomya is chair of the Journalists' Defense Committee in Kabul and he recently said "As long as the constitution and the courts exist in Afghanistan, the Shura-ye-Ulema is not authorised to pass sentence on anyone" the government is still yet to respond to his statement. The Institute for War & Peace Reporting Afghanistan Programme Director, Jean Mackenzie also weighed in on the topic when talking to journalists last week when he said, "If this intimidation continues, it would indicate a frightening new level of attacks on freedom of speech and the media in Afghanistan."

The situation has reached boiling point and Malalai Joya the first female Afghan MP also put her point of view in the public domain when she wrote in The Independent (UK) on Jnauary 31 "I utterly condemn this undemocratic act of those in power against Sayed Pervez Kambaksh. This situation has exposed the corruption of the government, which is inherently undemocratic, which does not believe in women's rights and which is willing to go to extreme lengths to prevent freedom of speech. Mr Kambaksh has not broken any law, but he is a "real" journalist, one who is not afraid to write articles exposing the corruption of the fundamentalists in power. This has been a bloody year for journalists in Afghanistan, and they are now in a lot of danger.

If Mr Kambaksh is killed for his "crime", then tomorrow it will be someone else. The situation that the press is faced with gives you a clear indication of the level of freedom and democracy in the country as a whole." Joya got it spot on with her comments and coming from a member of parliament it added more weight to her statements. She knows first hand what goes on in Afghanistan and is testament to the increasing fundamentalism in the country as she was suspended from the country's parliament for criticising fellow delegates. There is a very old saying that a cynic is a person who knows the price of everything and value of nothing, seemingly in Afghanistan the cynics have put a price on freedom, and that is a human life, if only they could figure out its value.