



Season 3. Episode 16: Reclaiming Civic Space Amid Global Repression: A dialogue with Lotfullah Najafizada from Afghanistan ahead of the Ottawa Civic Space Summit

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Hisham Allam: Hello everyone. Welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues. I'm your host, Hisham Allam. This is a special episode of our podcast. Our world is going through a fierce period of shrinking public and civic space filled by ongoing conflicts, war shrinking, foreign and humanitarian aids, and militaristic trends. It's highly important to remind ourselves about the need to resist and reclaim our human rights and freedoms.

My guest today is Lotfullah Najafizada from Afghanistan, the founder of Amu TV, a Washington, DC-based international news channel that reaches audience inside and outside Afghanistan. Lotfullah is joining us today with nearly 20 years on the front lines of Afghanistan media, including more than a decade, as Director of TOLONews and multiple press Freedom Awards.

I invite you to listen to our dialogue and follow his participation in one of this year's significant events in the field of civic space, the Ottawa Civic Space Summit.

The Ottawa Civic Space Summit is a new global platform to resist repression, reclaim civic power, and re-imagining a more inclusive democratic future.

The event is being convened by Resilient Societies and Cooperation Canada and supported by partners like DevelopmentAid.

This summit will take place in Ottawa, Canada from April 21 to 23, 2026. The small gathering will bring together several societal leaders, civic space activists, governments, donors, media, academics, and private sector allies to ignite hope and drive change. The registration will close on April 10th.

Follow the link in the outline and transcript to secure the spot.

[\[Summit registration\]](#)

Lotfullah, thank you for being with us today.

Lotfullah Najafizada: Thank you, Hisham. It is a pleasure to be with you.



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Hisham Allam: Let me ask you first, when we say reclaim the public square. What is actually at stake right now for journalists, civic society, and citizens who depend on open debate?

Lotfullah Najafizada: I think what's at the stake is the public square itself. And public square, as the phrase suggests, is where the public should have the say. And that is unfortunately eroding. Look at the recession of democratic nations: I would say, in the past 20 years the number of countries, autocracies is on the rise. I think now we have 91 or 92 autocracies and less than that, 85 or 87 democracies based on Democracy Without Borders' report.

And that indicates a severe recession of democracy. And that is where the public square, I think, is taking a hard hit. For that, we need to bring people back to the center of discussion and healthy discussion. I think that's what is at stake right now.

Hisham Allam: Yes, I also agree. And that sets the frame. Now speaking about the pressures made of freedom, faces, pressure from state actors, economic fragility, and platform algorithms, which of these do you see rallying public trust fastest in 2026?

Lotfullah Najafizada: This is an interesting discussion, but for me, particularly someone coming from Afghanistan at the moment where the Taliban turned Afghan free media which was the freest in the entire region to one of the most sort of closed spaces, I would say state actors is something that I'm deeply concerned as especially now that you have more autocratic states around the world, but it doesn't mean that we can really under a state the threats of economic fragility as well as particularly social media and the way they are contributing to the erosion of trust in media. I think it's a combination of all, but look, we are dealing with state actors who, as a matter of policy, is trying to introduce a more systematic censorship.

And censorship is killing trust. And people would distance themselves from media and from free media. Unfortunately, we see more and more of that, which is exacerbated and supported by what you said - platform algorithms. As well as the very dire economic situation for free press around the world. I mean, Washington Post, I think just a month or so ago, shut down their entire international desk. They fired journalists who were covering Iran in the middle of the Middle East crisis.

Hisham Allam: And so, it's not only the Taliban who is doing this, there are some democratic states, democratic regimes practicing kind of pressure on journalism.

Lotfullah Najafizada: I agree. I think there is a level of pressure. That is expected from all governments, including in Democratic states. And I think overall we have a media issue; it is the erosion of democracy here, rather than institutions not really supporting free media. But you see it also in the West. I mean, look at the press Freedom Index by RSF. The map is becoming more red and more orange. Yes. And you see, you see very few green now.



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Hisham Allam: Yes. So, speaking of state actors, let's get a specific. Take Trump's public attack on CNN and New York Times since his 2025 integration. They grab headlines but have not shifted those outlets at the two-line, one inch. Not disprove media resilience or just expose how political noise drowns out real threats.

Lotfullah Najafizada: I think the US media is polarized, unfortunately. And you can easily live in one world and be very distant from the other. But at the same time, it's very, sophisticated and very experienced. Yes, especially the amount of challenges that you mentioned that they're dealing with, coming from the current administration as well as the other actors. I think yes. There has been a great degree of resilience demonstrated by US media. But you also see the level of, polarizing content in the United States, which in my view is not very healthy for any democracy.

Hisham Allam: I agree. Beyond noise, the operational squeeze is brutal. Journalists today are not just reporting civic decline. They are often their first target through funding, code, surveillance, and legal pressure. Are they now on the last real defense of open civic space?

Lotfullah Najafizada: Yeah, I mean, journalists are now dealing with challenges in our case for our own safety. We've had journalists arrested by the Taliban in Afghanistan, for instance. Scores of them, hundreds of them in the past few years. But also, there is an increasing level of legal issues, in so many countries, south Asia or even in Europe.

We are really working very hard, journalists all around the world for our own survival and for that, I think we need to think about creative solutions such as working together, building alliances, and focusing more on reporting around democracy. You know, I've been saying in the past few years especially since the return of the Taliban, back to power in Afghanistan that no one, no country, including in the modern world, in developed world, should take democracy for granted. This is something that you have to keep working on. And I think media is definitely playing a big role.

But as you said, in a situation where journalists are the first targets, with loss in funding, with more surveillance issues, with legal issues, then who's gonna, who's gonna protect journalists, I think we have to invest in mechanisms and in institutions that their job is to look after journalists.

And journalists can look after stories and, you know, go produce good content. There has to be a clear division of labor, which all contribute to healthy and free media reporting.

Hisham Allam: Yes. As you have said, governments talk about principles but act differently. We see governments pledge free expression while passing digital surveillance laws and starving public interest media.

What did the single biggest disconnect you see in their approach?



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Lotfullah Najafizada: I think there's a lack of, one, lack of follow up.

Hisham Allam: Who should follow up?

Lotfullah Najafizada: Constituents, people, but also institutions and governments. I mean, governments make good promises every now and then. For instance, in Canada. In the G7 summit last year, Canada, for the first time, together with other G7 leaders mentioned, the threat of transnational repression, TNR.

And that was very good news for so many journalists who have left their country, that work from overseas and see the threat of surveillance, the threat of intimidation, and I haven't really seen any major steps. Instead, what has happened they talked about establishing mechanisms to follow up on TNR, in Canada as well as elsewhere in G7.

I think sometimes these pledges that you said are not really followed up. How can we force the government to do it. I think partially journalists should also keep reporting, on some of these and constituent pressure is also very important that they know that this is gonna affect them in their next time they go to ballot.

Hisham Allam: But how to keep reporting. We are facing you and me and other journalists, budget cuts, kind of self-censorship and administrative censorship and a lot of laws that are tying our hand.

Lotfullah Najafizada: I think, I mean, it's like developing a news bulletin. You can't just focus on one story. And that's what I see too much in our world today. Everyone is focusing on the big story, and you lose focus on so many important but smaller stories. I think the people should be given, sort of the big picture where you see coverage of nonpolitical or non-sort of major headline stories. And yes, when we see censorship, when we see some other challenges, I think it's the responsibility of the newsrooms to be more creative to find loopholes because these things are not new. Yes, we are probably at a peak right now. But we've been dealing with some of these challenges forever. I've been reporting on Afghanistan for the past 20 years, so in Afghanistan and on Afghanistan. And Afghanistan was the deadliest country for journalists for 20 years. We lost over a hundred, colleagues and reporters to direct Taliban attacks. But it did not really cause press freedom to decline. Their sacrifices made us more resilient, made us more creative, made us more committed to the cause,

Hisham Allam: Who's making the change and the brave reporting reported in exile or those who are on the ground.

Lotfullah Najafizada: I think both. I'm mostly referring to the Afghanistan before 2021. After 2021 with the return of the Taliban, things have changed. Things have changed in a way that there are journalists who are committed to free reporting and free media. But then there are Taliban who do not want anything, that criticize them.



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Especially if you're a female journalist. They're not even allowing you or a female journalist to talk to a man. You have to cover your faith when you appear on screen. If you are doing a talk show, you have to check with them, the topic in advance, select guests from the pool of vetted, or the less that they have provided to you. But journalists and exile journalists overseas is trying to bypass that firewall by talking to people directly. We have this column show, which has been covered by Globe and Mail recently. And global News TV and the BBC that up to 6,000 people call this call and show in just one hour from inside Afghanistan on WhatsApp.

So, when you're dealing with that kind of people, you know, who want to be expressive, want to be engaged, and then you have a government a ruler, not allowing local media to provide that platform. That's where hybrid media or exile media, or diaspora media, comes into play. And I think that's what we do at Amu TV at the moment, is trying to bypass the Taliban firewall, enable people in Afghanistan to talk freely and in thousands.

And which it makes it impossible for the Taliban to go and create that kind of blanket censorship.

Hisham Allam: Speaking about hybrid media and tech, which is adding another layer on how to fight back with AI flooding news feeds and platforms like X dictating reach. How should media adapt without trading editorial independence for survival?

Or can you give us one non-obvious tactic?

Lotfullah Najafizada: I think we should not rely too much on social media for distribution of quality content. Social media is a platform for distribution of content, but it is not a place where you can go to find it. It's not a newsroom, right? It's not where you have different layers of editorial control or oversight.

And I think Canada is probably a good example here because Canada has this, law that is encouraging people to go use the original source of the news. So, if they want to write, if they want to sort of see the Globe and Mail reporting or Toronto Star, or CBC and others. They encourage us to go to the website to read them or the TV channel or the newspaper, rather than finding them on X or on Facebook.

I think that is a good way of keeping the focus narrow and pure to the pure content, which is out there. Of course, I'm not in favor of censorship and social media as well, but social media is not journalism. I think that is what a lot of people are confused in today's world. They see all sorts of content and opinionated narratives, and it's really hard to distinguish between, you know, what's right and what's spec to them, as you said.

Algorithm is creating this balloon around you that is making your opinions shift in a way that you think you're right. And everybody else is wrong. And that is in a way also a threat to democracy, to understanding, to your ability to be able to agree with people you don't agree with.

Hisham Allam: Also control the public opinion with fake accounts and spreading fake narratives. I agree with you somehow on this, but what do you think of accounts that are using open-source information and produce a good quality piece of journalism?



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Lotfullah Najafizada: Yes. Yes. I think we need digital literacy. Not everybody's spreading fake news or misinformation. We are actually talking about algorithms as well as actors with ill intentions who want to use this opportunity. To push the narrative that is far from the truth.

And for that, I think every society, particularly the global south, needs very proactive digital literacy campaigns. And it's sometimes it's very hard, even for our readers in Afghanistan and elsewhere to distinguish between, you know, a credible platform versus somebody with massive social media followings, pumping, polarized content, polarized hatred and racism and discrimination.

And I think the only way to address this is to empower the readers, the consumers, that they know what they're dealing with and that they are not confused by the content that they see.

Hisham Allam: Loftullah, if we want journalism to survive in 2026. Rank these points by impact legal chills and dependent funding pools, tech safety tools or public mandate for platforms accountability.

Lotfullah Najafizada: Oh, this is a tough one, but I think they're all important. I think independent funding is absolutely critical because if you don't survive. How can you do your job? So that's why you know, you must have that independent support.

I think legal shield is also equally important because then you don't outlaw journalist who provide critical reporting, and you see more and more of this in today's world. I think the third one. I would say probably tech safety tools is something that is protecting journalists and it's needed. Here in Canada the Citizen Lab is doing an amazing job. I interviewed the director of Citizen Lab for a think tank event recently, and I was so pleased to live in a society where organizations like the Citizens Lab try to protect journalists. So, this kind of education particularly around digital security and cybersecurity, is absolutely critical.

And accountability as well. Yeah, I think is, I mean they're all important, but I would say you need to have independent funding and legal support to have the resources and the freedom to operate and the rest are adds on and empowers you further to reclaim the public square and help journalism survive in 2026 and beyond. The world today for media is very scary. And that's why I think we need all of them and more.

Hisham Allam: That gets us to civic space. Would you describe a healthy civic space in practice? Not ideals, but what daily public life looks like when debate thrives and dissent is not punished.

Lotfullah Najafizada: It looks ordinary. Reporters asking hard questions without fear, right? And activists meeting without surveillance and citizens criticizing leaders without really losing their jobs and disagreements can happen without punishment. This is probably, I don't know. I mean, in some societies it may sound too much, and some not really.



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And to me, these are what we've experienced in the past. With variations of good and bad. But overall, this is how a healthy civic space would probably look to me. And this is part of it, or all of it is one way or the other under attack. Probably everywhere around the world today.

Hisham Allam: Events like Canada's Civic Summit promise human rights progress. Do they genuinely expand the social and civic space or just generate good declarations with no teeth?

Lotfullah Najafizada: I'm very excited about it. I think it's the first time it's happened. I'm very excited to be there and to speak about this particular topic.

And I think it can definitely be empowered if we come out of it. Yes, it's good to feel good about it but at the same time, come out of the summit with some concrete action points and with a plan of action that we can follow through. A lot of these events, yes, good conversations happen but are rarely followed up.

I would say that there are three things that, you know, we come out of this and then we say we're gonna do this until the next summit. This is absolutely critical, particularly for the organizers to see how they can bridge the summit next year. Which I believe is going to happen as well. In between what we're gonna discuss later this month.

Hisham Allam: What should realistic attendees expect from that summit? Pending policy wins. Strong activist network, or just another round of photos and panel talks.

Lotfullah Najafizada: I think recognizing the challenges and agreeing on the challenges, particularly if they are common and collective. And understanding each other that, okay, if something is happening in Canada might sound different. In the outset to what's happening in Nigeria, for instance. But the core of it is similar; it is one thing. So maybe a sharper common language is important. And at the same time, I think alliance building and networking is critical, especially when hundreds of people come from different parts of the world.

I think. Yeah, sympathy and empathy is something that I wanna see out of these conferences. So, people come not only for what they're looking for but also learning from others and trying to find strength out of other people's contributions and basically believe in working together.

So, this civic space is a space for everyone, a space for all civic actors. And you can't, really, in my view, especially in the age of algorithms and digital; you can't really limit it to a particular geography. So, you must have a certain understanding, a certain level of cooperation, which is cross border.



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Hisham Allam: Lotfullah, economic moves often hide a real clamp down. Consider Rwanda's 2025 media tax hikes or India's digital registry mandates—they hit independent outlets hardest. How do these “economic” moves quietly shrink civic space more than overt bans?

Lotfullah Najafizada: Because sometimes, you know, you bury these censorships and restrictions under administrative barriers, and that's why we have to look beyond what is introduced as a sort of a tax reform that you mentioned in those two countries in particular or the press registration system in India that you mentioned.

I think making life more difficult for content producers and journalists and media outlets is another way of limiting their abilities to do it. Maybe it's interesting for your audience if I give another reference to Afghanistan that even as a YouTube content producer, if you're a YouTuber in Afghanistan, you have to have a license now.

And with that license, you have to pay for it. And let alone the content that you produce has to be aligned with what the Taliban authorities want you to do it. So, we're dealing with a lot of sort of creative, sophisticated censorship mechanisms throughout the world. Whether that is the name, other name of, you know, taxation or streamlining policies I think this is where a lot of, institutions such as CPJ and others have to come in and ensure that governments who may not use the word censorship, is not applying censorship through introduction of such mechanisms and policies.

Hisham Allam: Thank you for this. Back to the summit core mission to truly reclaim the public square at the summit, what is priority one? Rebuilding public trust and seeking institutional accountability or protecting the role of right to disagree without digital exile.

Lotfullah Najafizada: That's a very important question. I mean, that is the theme of the summit as well. The raw right to disagree has to be protected and respected. So, if you have an alternative opinion, it doesn't mean that you have to pay the price for it. And that is where you can build trust.

You know, trust common trust where the one space, not different spaces that are in contradiction with each other, at war with each other and in data space. I don't think you can really build accountability at all. I think more sorts of common understanding of shared challenges can happen only when you protect the raw right to disagree in my view.

Hisham Allam: Thank you Lotfullah a lot for this nice conversation. That is the unfiltered take on reclaiming the public square. Less about slogans, more about survival, accountability, and who actually hold the microphone in 2026. Lotfullah, thank you again for bringing frontline clarity from Afghanistan and for the work you and your team at Amu TV, keep doing under extraordinary pressure.

To our listeners, have this conversation resonated. Share it, subscribe and follow whenever you get DevelopmentAid Dialogue podcast. I'm your host, Hisham Allam, saying it off. Thank you for listening and goodbye.