



The Taliban Rule and the Radicalisation of Education in Afghanistan

Hussain Rezaei*

Abstract: Since their takeover of power in Afghanistan, the Taliban have made several decisions to radicalise the education and higher education systems, on the basis of an extremely conservative interpretation of Sharia. The consequences are dire and far-reaching, affecting certain disadvantaged groups more than others. The most affected are young girls whose access to secondary education is banned.

The Taliban's first decision to prohibit secondary education for female students in 2021 has been the boldest one thus far. This is justified as temporary by Taliban officials claiming that the group is working out a decision on female uniforms and curricula to ensure consistency with 'Islamic values' as interpreted by the Taliban. This decision has made Afghanistan the [only state](#) in the world where girls and women do not have access to secondary education. Such a situation marks a

* Hussain Rezaei is a researcher and human rights activist. He worked with national and international organisations in Afghanistan over the past 10 years. He holds a master's in international relations and a bachelor's in philosophy and sociology. He is one of the recipients of the Global Campus of Human Rights' Afghanistan Scholars at Risk Project. He tweets @Husain_rezai

significant rollback of the strides that the country had made over the last two decades. Education, particularly girls' and women's education, had [improved dramatically](#) in the past twenty years with the support of the international community with enrollment in schools [reaching 9.5 million](#), and girls making up 39 percent of the students.

Notably, the banning of secondary education for females had characterised the Taliban's policies in the 1990s. Mullah Omar, the founder and then leader of the group, issued a Decree in 1996 which declared education for girls to be [temporarily stopped](#) due to concerns about the safety of female students. The regime remained in power for five years during which women and girls were banned from all levels of schools and universities.

The overwhelming fundamentalist approach

The Taliban's view on education and women has strong and deep ideological underpinnings. They consider [education as a means](#) that can be leveraged to restore 'Islamic values', establish and promote [real Islamic institutions](#) and fight against what they call ['western and infidel thoughts'](#). In August 2021, for example, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, a member of the Haqqani network who was the Taliban's Minister of Higher Education until 17 October 2022, [said](#) that the people of Afghanistan will continue their higher education in light of Islamic law. The Haqqani Network—defined as a [terroristic](#) organisation by both the United States and United Nations—remains a dominant faction within the Taliban government and has a big say in the group's overall policies and approaches.

Abdul Baqi Haqqani's assignment seems strategic and ideological. He imposed an extremely conservative interpretation of Sharia law on Afghanistan's higher education system, particularly on curriculum, segregation of genders and female students' dress code. He once publicly [stated](#) that Islam is more important than qualifications. He also questioned the educational achievements of the past two decades under the support of the international community and said that there are [no expectations](#) for those who have done schooling in the last twenty years.

Similarly, Mawlawi Noorullah Munir, who worked as the Taliban Minister of Education until 26 September 2022, questioned the [importance of education](#) itself. He said that 'IN]o Ph.D. or master's degree is valuable today. You see that the Mullahs and Taliban that are in power have no Ph.D., masters, or even a high school degree, but they are the greatest of all.'

Therefore, the Taliban recruited some of their fighters as heads of universities and key educational and academic positions across the country. An example are the appointments of the Taliban's Ministers of Education and Higher Education, who both are mullahs with basic religious studies in a mullah-dominated cabinet. The term 'mullahs' refers to individuals who graduated from *madrasas* (religious

schools). Another argument of their ideological approach is that existing educational curricula have been developed under the influence of western countries, and thus would contravene core 'Islamic values'. According to such a line of thinking, there would be a need to develop new curricula in order to eliminate 'foreign influences' and become compatible with 'Islamic values'.

The ongoing attempt to make education curricula 'Islamic'

The Taliban have revised education curricula to [prioritise religious studies](#) with an extremely conservative interpretation of Islam. The group has tasked a commission, which has so far [rejected](#) some subjects that were previously part of school and university curricula, including art, culture and civic education. The related books have been deemed to address democracy, elections, the Constitution, human rights, music and other topics in contradiction to 'Islamic values'. In some provinces, the Taliban have already replaced English, culture, history and physical education classes with [Islamic subjects](#). According to the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the Taliban aim to teach [war and jihad](#) as two distinct concepts across schools in Afghanistan.

In May 2022, the Taliban's former Minister of Education, Mawlawi Noorullah Munir, inaugurated the [largest religious school](#). He also announced their plans to build three to ten [madrasa](#) in each district of Afghanistan. There are [reportedly](#) more than 13,000 unregistered religious schools, 1,275 registered religious schools and 150 institutes of religious studies in Afghanistan. In addition, the Taliban announced they will [assign](#) 15,000 mullahs to fight against Western thoughts. They have also created specific committees like 'religious police' to guide students at universities.

Similarly, the Taliban's former Minister of Higher Education, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, imposed a range of changes to make this system 'more Islamic', announcing that every subject that contradicts [Sharia law](#) will be removed from academic syllabuses. Based on his decision, the credit hours for Islamic subjects have also increased from 8 to 24 credits across universities nationally. Additionally, they have conducted [religious guideline classes](#) for students of some universities, particularly for those staying in public dormitories.

Such efforts have involved strict policing and intelligence jobs. The Taliban's Ministry of Higher Education ordered their representatives at universities to check teachers' past performances and identify those who are supposedly 'corrupt' and 'subversive' for their secular and open-minded approach. They have already [removed](#) some professors, replacing them with their own fighters. The same Ministry also asked private universities to [not hire teachers](#) without the presence of a representative of the Taliban in the hiring process or without final agreement from the Ministry. They aim to ensure that the people who agree with the regime are hired in both public and private universities.

The Ministry of Higher Education even [locked](#) the door of the Music and Art Faculty of Kabul University, replacing it with a course on Taliban's hymns and anthems. Further, they banned the teaching of all forms of art, including drawing, there. Moreover, the students have been told that they do not have the right to criticise the Taliban. Considering all these destructive and restrictive decisions, Haqqani has been called the 'minister of [fighting against](#) higher education'.

The serious risk to radicalise new generations

Over the past year, the Taliban have tirelessly tried to operationalise what they call the 'Islamic education system' in Afghanistan. If the current situation continues, schools and universities built with the support of the international community over the past two decades will be changed into Taliban religious *madrassas*, which will involve indoctrination, radicalisation and brainwashing of students. In such a scenario, sadly, the new generations of Afghanistan will be educated with the most conservative and restrictive interpretation of Islam. In other words, they will become deeply radicalised—potential Talibs, Jihadists and extremists.

Since their takeover, the Taliban have shown no signs of tolerating even the most of minimum [academic freedom](#) in educational institutions in Afghanistan. Rather, they have created an atmosphere of fear and terror where teachers and professors are left with no other options but to leave the country or resign from their work. Based on such restrictive and conservative policy decisions, female students have been deprived of their right to education for more than one year now. A large number of educational institutions including private schools and tuition centers have already been closed. The Taliban's actions have brought the national education system to the verge of collapse.

Acting further against the Taliban's disregard for core international and national laws

Such detrimental decisions on education, particularly the banning of secondary schools for girls, are clearly against relevant national and international laws. The right to education for boys and girls was guaranteed in Afghanistan's [Constitution](#) (Articles 43-44) adopted in 2004, and it was strongly supported without discrimination over the past twenty years. The [Education Law of 2008](#) addressed equal rights for all children, free and compulsory education until grade nine and free education until the ending of a bachelor's degree. The three National Education Strategic Plans (from 2006 to 2021), particularly the [third plan \(2017-2021\)](#), were towards the progressive realisation of this right.

At the international level, the right to education has been recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, Article 26) and has been reaffirmed in human rights treaties (for example, CESCR Articles 13-14; CRC Articles 28-29; CEDAW Article 10) which Afghanistan ratified. International humanitarian law enhances the

legal framework for the protection of education in times of armed conflict, also making provisions for specific situations.

In September 2022 the UN Special Rapporteur Richard Bennett urged the de facto authorities to

'ensure women's equal participation in education, employment, governance and all other aspects of public life; and immediately and unconditionally reopen all girls' secondary schools, and ensure equal and quality education for girls and boys at all levels'.

Importantly, the UN General Assembly's wide-ranging resolution adopted on 10 November 2022—with a vote of 116 in favour, no countries against, and 10 abstentions—called on Taliban authorities to reverse their policies and practices restricting the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls in Afghanistan.