

The dire human rights situation in Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban

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Key words: *Afghanistan; Taliban; human rights; women's rights; media*

1. Introduction

The Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. After their takeover, they announced their commitment to respecting human rights within an Islamic framework. Now that the Taliban have been in power for a year, it is possible to provide a picture of what the Taliban's stance continues to be on topics such as human rights. This time period gives us evidence to assess their putative statements and expression of commitment to the people and the international community. To what extent have the Taliban 2.0 implemented the commitments and promises regarding human rights which they made to the people of Afghanistan and the international community?

Shortly after their takeover on August 15, 2021, the Taliban declared a general amnesty for all, including former government officials and former members of the security forces (Aljazeera 2021). They even wrote letters of guarantee for some individuals in which they stated that they would not seek revenge against the holders of the letters (Marcolini et al. 2022). Some weeks later, the Taliban Minister of Defence asked former military officers and pilots who had already fled the country to return to the country and continue their jobs (Afghanistan International 2022a). In subsequent months, Taliban spokespersons have frequently asked those who have fled the country to return and take part in rebuilding Afghanistan.

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Beyond amnesty, the Taliban have also announced their commitment to respecting human rights, allowing women to continue their work in the government, letting girls continue their education, and respecting freedom of speech within an Islamic framework (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022) and within Sharia law (Aljazeera 2021). They have also pledged to sever ties with other terrorist groups, and have stated that they want to have a good relationship with the world. With these promises and announcements, the Taliban have tried hard to project a moderate face for the people of Afghanistan and the international community, to prove that they have moved on from the stances and approaches they pursued during their rule in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. During that period, the Taliban were infamous for human rights violations: forcing women to stay at home, banning education for girls, excluding non-Pashtun ethnic groups from power, committing massacres against the Hazaras, banning music and free media, and ruling the country by fear and draconian laws.

The reality over recent months has been grim and dismaying. National and international human rights organisations and many media reports show that the rosy promises of the Taliban have proved to be hollow. In general, the human rights situation has deteriorated under the Taliban. The regime has harshly violated human rights in Afghanistan since its takeover. Reports show that they have used the general amnesty as a trap for former government officials, especially for former security forces. In numerous cases, the Taliban directed former security forces to register themselves to receive a letter of guarantee for their safety, only to use this process to detain, execute and forcibly disappear individuals within days of their registration (HRW 2021).

The November 2021 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW 2021) documented how Taliban forces executed or forcibly disappeared more than 100 former security officials in just four provinces from August to November 2021. A more recent investigation by the *New York Times* shows the persistence of this approach, revealing that nearly 500 former government officials and members of the security forces were killed or forcibly disappeared during the first six months of Taliban rule in Afghanistan (Marcolini et al. 2022). Anecdotal sources, however, put the number of security forces personnel killed by the Taliban in the past year as high as five thousand.

Local media reports show that the detaining, killing and forced disappearance are not only limited to former members of the security forces but also include civilians, civil service employees and political opponents (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022; HRW 2022b). One grave example of the killing of civilians by the Taliban took place in Panjshir province, in which at least twenty civilians were killed (BBC 2021). The Taliban forces also continue to arrest and detain

individuals for the peaceful expression of their opinion or dissent. On January 8, 2022, Faizullah Jalal, a university professor, was arrested by the Taliban for challenging the Taliban in media discussions (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). He was released after three days and banned from appearing in the media. On March 5, 2022, Baqer Mohseni, a university professor and political analyst who criticised and challenged the Taliban in media discussions, was arrested by Taliban forces and released after two days following widespread public dissent on social media.

2. A regime of gender apartheid

Over recent months, the Taliban regime has implemented a policy of gender apartheid in Afghanistan, contrary to what they have consistently promised to the people and the international community (Green 2022). Women under the Taliban's rule are about to lose all their human rights and past achievements to the Taliban's restrictive anti-women policies. In September 2021 the Taliban dissolved the Ministry for Women's Affairs, which had been founded in late 2001 to implement government policies to secure women's rights and promote gender equality in the country (HRW 2022b). The building that housed this ministry was purposely taken over by the Taliban Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV), which implements the regime's harsh interpretations of Islamic rules on citizens' behaviour, especially on women's dress code (HRW 2022b). This ministry determines the size of men's beards, the way they are expected to dress, and the way they should pray. Basically, it does not recognise the most basic freedoms of the citizens.

The Taliban have also stopped the operation of the Afghanistan Independent Commission of Human Rights (AIHRC) and reportedly intends to change the mandate of the commission (Lalzooy 2021). On April 15, 2022, the media reported that the Taliban had turned the Bamiyan provincial office of the AIHRC into a military base and were using its basement as "a prison and torture rooms" (Afghanistan International 2022b). Similarly, women's shelters that provided protection and accommodation for women who were fleeing various forms of violence have been closed down (Rubin 2021), and some of them have been changed into women's prisons (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022).

Even prior to August 2021, Afghanistan had been designated the most dangerous place for women in the world (Bowcott 2011). Gender inequality, discrimination and gender-based violence were some of the key challenges for women in Afghanistan before the Taliban's takeover. Despite this, women had been active in all three branches of the government. Women held 27 percent of seats in the Parliament and 22 percent of seats in the upper house. One-fifth of civil servants were women, including

those in the justice sector. More than 1,700 women used to work in different roles in the media sector across the country (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). Before the collapse of the former government, 9.2 million children were in school, of whom 38 percent were girls (Pherali 2021).

Now almost all of these female students and teachers are either gone or remain in extreme danger as women are excluded from the public space and the workforce. The Taliban dismissed almost all female employees of the government from their positions, and now they are officially prohibited from working in most government jobs and many other areas (HRW 2022b). As of May 2022, secondary school for girls remains shut down and the restrictions on women, specifically their freedom of movement, continue to increase day in and day out.

On March 27, the Taliban's MPVPV announced that women were not permitted to travel abroad without a male guardian (Barr 2022). On March 27, they banned women from parks in Kabul for four days of the week (Barr 2022). Earlier, on December 26, 2021, the MPVPV had ordered that women were not to travel further than 72 kilometres unless accompanied by a *mahram* (chaperone). The guidance also prohibits taxi drivers from taking female passengers if they are not wearing a proper hijab (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022).

There are also reports of further restrictions on women's freedom of movement at the provincial level. For instance, in Balkh province, women were banned from public bathhouses in late December. In the same province, the Taliban forces have reportedly detained women (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022); in Herat province, they have tortured women found without a *mahram* (Afghanistan International 2022c). Women have also been prevented from accessing health services in some provinces if not accompanied by a *mahram* (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). The Taliban have also violently suppressed women's protests in several cities across Afghanistan. As a result, women are significantly excluded from public spaces in the country.

3. Restriction on freedom of media and civic space

Freedom of speech and the expansion of the media was one of the most notable achievements of Afghanistan post-2001. However, this is now seriously restricted by the Taliban. Before August 2021, Afghanistan had 1,879 active media outlets, comprising 203 TV channels, 349 radio stations and 1,327 print outlets (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). The media sector used to employ thousands of media professionals, including 1,139 female journalists. Now the spaces for media, freedom of speech and civil society have been dramatically reduced. A survey has found that a total of 318 media outlets shut down

across the country between August 2021 to February 2022 (International Federation of Journalists 2022). This means only 305 of the 623 media organisations that were active before the Taliban are still operating, under the general environment of fear, direct threat and increasing censorship. More than 6,400 journalists have lost their jobs since August 15, 2021, and 80 percent of them are women (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). Many journalists have left the country while others are planning to leave the country or living in hiding because of their work in the years before the Taliban resumed power (Marty 2021).

The Taliban have imposed a range of restrictions on media operation and freedom of speech. Access to information from the media is also strongly restricted. On September 19, 2021, the Taliban ministry of information and culture announced a set of eleven directives and regulations for media operation (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). Based on this regulation, media outlets are prohibited from printing or broadcasting reports that “are contrary to Islam,” “insult national figures,” or “distort news content.” Journalists are required to not report on “matters that have not been confirmed by officials” or issues that “could have a negative impact on the public attitude.” Media outlets are required to “prepare detailed reports” with the Taliban media centre before publication.

Since August 15, 2021, more than forty journalists and media workers have been arbitrarily detained, beaten or intimidated by the Taliban (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). Journalists and media workers have also been targeted by Taliban forces while covering peaceful demonstrations. For example, on September 30, 2021, Taliban forces detained two journalists, Taqi Daryabi and Nemat Naqdi, from *Etilaat-e Roz* newspaper as they were covering protests by women in Kabul. They were severely flogged before being released on September 8, 2021, with severe injuries.

The Taliban have also taken a harsh position on music and arts and have created an environment of fear and intimidation because of their extremely conservative interpretation of Islam. On March 18, 2022, the Taliban banned media outlets in Afghanistan from broadcasting international news programs, including news bulletins from the Voice of America and BBC programs in Dari, Pashto and Uzbeki languages (Marty 2022). The Taliban have banned the playing of music by the media across the country, and the playing of music in public spaces in some parts of the country (Rawnaq 2021). Some members of the Taliban have said that music in public spaces was forbidden by Islam (Shafaqna 2021).

So far, the Taliban have not tolerated peaceful protests if the protests were against them or challenging them. They have suppressed women’s protests in several cities across the country by using violent means including “live ammunition, batons, whips, pepper spray, tear gas and

beatings”, and they have detained some of the women who participated in these protests (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). For instance, on September 7, 2021, the Taliban forces reportedly shot and killed two men and wounded several others in a protest in Herat. On the same day, the Taliban forces reportedly beat and detained protesters, including women, and up to fifteen journalists covering the demonstration in Kabul.

The suppression of peaceful assemblies has continued. On September 8, 2021, the Taliban Ministry of the Interior banned any demonstrations that did not have their official approval. Following that order, they arrested several women activists, especially those who were involved in the protests (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). Since August 15, 2021, ten civil society activists have been killed, five of whose deaths were attributed to the Taliban (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). The bodies of dead women have been found in a number of cities across the country, while the perpetrators of those killings remain unknown.

4. Violation of political and economic rights

The political and economic rights of citizens fare no better. On September 7, 2021, the Taliban announced a so-called interim government made up entirely of male Taliban fighters and clerics mainly from the Pashtun ethnic group (US Department of State 2021). Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country according to Article 4 of the Constitution adopted in 2004, but this has been ignored. The Taliban, despite national and international pressures, have not yet formed an inclusive government and the people are deprived of enjoying their political rights. The Taliban interim government only has a few persons from non-Pashtun ethnic groups: these include the Deputy Prime Minister, who is an Uzbek, the Chief of Army Personnel who is Tajik, and two Hazara deputy ministers. The non-Pashtun ethnic groups and women who challenged the Taliban are not represented, which is part of their structural persecution by the Taliban.

Reports reveal that the Taliban have dismissed Hazara, Tajiks and other non-Pashtun ethnic groups from civil service administrations (Etilaatroz 2022a). A January 2022 report showed that all Hazara employees from the court system had been dismissed by the Taliban, who have said that the Hazara cannot be judges (Etilaatroz 2022b). Before that report, in September 2021, the Taliban forces forcibly displaced and evicted at least 400 Hazara families in Daikundi province (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2022). Similarly, in October 2021, some 200 families were forcefully displaced in the Nawmesh district of Helmand Province by the Taliban. Forced evictions also happened in Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan and Balkh (Graham-Harrison 2021), and the Taliban have displaced people in Panjshir province on a large scale (La Prensa Latina 2021). The

Taliban are a predominantly Pashtun ethnic nationalist group that does not respect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country, and which has the aim of cultural assimilation. Recently, there have been reports that Persian/Dari words have been removed from the name of Balkh University and in some other provinces (Etilaatroz 2022c). Afghanistan is diverse in languages, with over forty languages being spoken and Persian and Pashto included as the official languages of the country in the Constitution that was in effect before the Taliban.

The current situation in Afghanistan is dire in all senses. Many people fear the outbreak of a new civil war. A Gallup survey in August 2021 found that 53 percent of the respondents wanted to leave the country (Ray 2022). The Taliban, in some cases, have prevented people from leaving (Afghanistan International 2022d). The percentage of people wanting to leave the country may have increased since the Gallup survey due to the humanitarian crisis, as only 5 percent of people have enough to eat and 95 percent of people have been experiencing “insufficient food consumption and food insecurity” (WFP 2021). Nearly 100 percent of female-headed households are experiencing insufficient food consumption (WFP 2021). In response to this situation, the Taliban Prime Minister Mullah Hasan said that they had not promised food for the people in Afghanistan and asked people to “cry to God to alleviate famine and drought” (Khalid 2021).

5. Some steps towards changing the situation

To this point, two patterns have emerged within the international community and international organisations for putting pressure on the Taliban to respect human rights and form an inclusive government: conditional engagement and the monitoring of human rights violations. Thus far, the Taliban regime has not officially been recognised by any country in the world. There remains strong national and international pressure on the Taliban to respect human rights and form an inclusive government. On the national level, many people, especially women, continue their objection against the rulers in innovative ways, from launching advocacy campaigns on social media platforms to protesting from their homes in small groups. On the international level, most countries, along with the EU, have made their engagement with the Taliban conditional. In September 2021, the European Union set five necessary benchmarks to be met before links could be resumed, including respect for human rights, especially women’s rights, and the establishment of an inclusive and representative government in Afghanistan (General Secretariat of the Council 2021).

International human rights organisations have also attempted to hold the Taliban to account on their promises to respect human rights. This has been conducted through reports, documentation and press conferences. To monitor the dire situation of human rights in Afghanistan, a group of human rights organisations has established the Alliance for Human Rights

in Afghanistan. Members of the alliance include Amnesty International, Front Line Defenders, Freedom House and Human Rights Watch (Freedom House 2022). The UN is monitoring the situation through the UN Human Rights Council, which on October 7, 2021, adopted a resolution to appoint a special rapporteur on Afghanistan. On April 1, 2022, the UN Human Rights Council appointed Richard Bennett as its Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, to monitor and document the violation of human rights in Afghanistan (Amnesty 2021).

The potential for these measures to produce a favourable outcome remains questionable. The Taliban continue to deny most of the violations, accusing media and human rights organisations of staging a propaganda war against them. At the same time, the conditional engagement approach is failing, as the humanitarian crisis in the country has ruled out sanctions as a feasible option. Divisions within the international community are another challenge, and one which makes it difficult for all members of the United Nations to hold the de facto regime to account on its commitments under international conventions.

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