

AFGHANISTAN

THE TALIBAN'S ASSAULT ON CIVIC SPACE, A YEAR ON FROM ITS TAKEOVER



Photo by Majid/Getty Images



INTRODUCTION

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban [seized power](#) in Afghanistan after the government collapsed. It was two weeks before the USA was set to complete its withdrawal of troops from the country. There was very limited resistance from Afghan government forces as the Taliban [moved](#) into Afghanistan's capital, Kabul.

Fearful that the Taliban would carry out reprisal against those who worked with the USA or the government and reimpose a [strict](#) interpretation of Sharia law, thousands of Afghans and non-nationals [rushed](#) to leave the country. In September 2021, the Taliban announced an [all-male](#) cabinet and abolished the country's Ministry of Women's Affairs, [replacing](#) it with the 'Ministry for Preaching and Guidance and the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice'.

Over the last year, human rights groups and the United Nations (UN) have [highlighted](#) how the Taliban has sought the erasure of women from public life, including the [suspension](#) of girls' secondary education, severe barriers to accessing employment and healthcare and limits on freedom of movement. Afghanistan's rapidly escalating [humanitarian crisis](#) has exacerbated these abuses, depriving much of the population of access to food, water, shelter and healthcare. There have also been [reports](#) of ongoing extrajudicial and revenge killings of former officials and members of the security forces.

At the same time, the Taliban have made a systematic assault on civic space, which is rated as [repressed](#) by the CIVICUS Monitor. Human rights defenders and journalists have faced harassment, attacks, arbitrary arrests and detention. In some cases, they have been tortured or ill-treated, abducted, killed, or disappeared. Civil society offices have been raided and funds frozen. There have been severe restrictions and disruption of peaceful protests, particularly those led by women, with excessive force used. The Taliban have dissolved the national human rights institution and taken over the bar association.

The following further details the significant civic space concerns that have been documented during this period.

HARASSMENT AND THREATS AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders have lived in a [climate of fear](#) since the Taliban takeover. Almost immediately after taking power, the Taliban conducted [house-to-house searches](#) of activists, particularly women human rights defenders, to interrogate them and their families about their work. The Taliban have also approached local mosques and used police officers to obtain [information](#) on activists and their whereabouts.

The [UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders](#) has reported that most at risk are people documenting alleged war crimes, women, particularly criminal lawyers, cultural rights defenders, especially those working in banned sectors such as musical performance, and others from minority groups. Civil society groups have also documented the targeting of [LGBTQI+ activists](#). Some activists said that they have erased their online data history to evade identification.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Afghanistan as “**Repressed**”.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN



According to [human rights groups](#), there have been numerous reports of human rights defenders and their families receiving threatening phone calls and warning letters, and of their offices being searched. While human rights defenders had actively sought refuge and looked for opportunities to leave the country, issues such as the lack of adequate documents and the impossibility of obtaining visas for many countries make it extremely difficult for most of them to leave Afghanistan. This has forced many defenders into hiding.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS, ABDUCTIONS AND KILLING OF ACTIVISTS

Activists have also been [arbitrarily arrested and detained](#) for their criticism of the Taliban. Professor Faizullah Jalal, a Kabul University lecturer, was [arrested](#) on 10 January 2022 for 'making provocative remarks against the government' and [detained](#) for four days. Jalal has made several appearances on television talk shows since the Taliban's return, blaming the Taliban for a worsening financial crisis and criticising them for ruling by force. In one television appearance, he called Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem a 'calf'. Clips of his criticism went viral online.

On 4 March 2022, the Taliban [arrested](#) Sayed Baqer Mohseni, an academic and political analyst. According to a relative, Mohseni and two of his friends were summoned by officials and then went missing and did not return home. He was reportedly [released](#) two days later.



Taliban patrol the streets of Kabul (Photo by Marco Di Lauro/Getty Images)

There has also been abduction of women human rights defenders by the Taliban with impunity. In January 2022, Taliban gunmen [raided](#) the homes of women's rights activists in Kabul, beating and arresting female campaigners following their involvement in demonstrations. On 19 January 2022, women human rights defenders Tamana Zaryab Paryani and Parwana Ibrahimkhel were [abducted](#) from their homes in Kabul. Three sisters of Paryani, the youngest only 13 years old, were also taken.

On 2 February 2022, another woman human rights defender, Mursal Ayar, was similarly [taken](#) from her house in Kabul's Kart-e-Naw district. Her family reported that at least 10 armed men, believed to be part of the Taliban, entered their house, physically assaulted Mursal Ayar and then abducted her.

The following day, woman human rights defender Zahra Mohammadi was [abducted from her office](#) in Kart-e-Parwan in Kabul and detained by the Taliban in an unknown location. Zahra Mohammadi is a member of the Afghan Women's Solidarity Team, which organised an indoor protest to demand the release of Tamana Zaryab Paryani and Parwana Ibrahimkhel. The Taliban initially denied the arbitrary arrests and detentions. All the activists were [released](#) weeks after they had been taken.

There have also been reports of civil society activists being killed following the Taliban takeover. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), in a [report](#) published in July 2022, at least 10 activists have been killed since 15 August 2021, with five killed by the Taliban and three by Islamic State Khorasan Province.



TARGETING OF CIVIL SOCIETY STAFF AND OFFICES

There have been incidents of civil society organisations (CSOs) being targeted for their work and restricted by the Taliban. According to [reports](#) by human rights groups following the Taliban takeover, there have been raids and searches of CSO offices and some have had their bank accounts frozen. Women's rights programmes have also been halted by the Taliban and most CSO offices have closed, fearing reprisals.

The Taliban searched several national CSO offices in Kabul on 25 August 2021. CSOs were questioned about their vehicles and assets and the names of staff members.

In a western province, a prominent woman rights defender reported that the Taliban were now in [control of her organisation's office](#) and using it as a military post. They destroyed the equipment in the office and are using the organisation's vehicles.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [reported](#) in September 2021 that they had received information regarding Taliban raids on CSO offices. On 12 September 2021, about 30 Taliban members came to a CSO office asking about the organisation, its director and its activities, wrongly [accusing it](#) of organising demonstrations on women's rights and running a women's shelter.

On 4 November 2021, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that Taliban rules prohibiting most women from operating as aid workers were worsening the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. The group said that in over half of the country, women aid workers face severe restrictions, such as requirements for a male family member to escort them while they do their jobs, making it difficult or impossible for them to do their jobs effectively.

REPRESSION OF PROTESTS

Following the Taliban takeover, thousands of people, especially women, took to the streets to [protest](#) against the Taliban and demand their rights. In Kabul and other cities, the Taliban responded with excessive force, gunfire and beatings to disperse crowds, leading to deaths and injuries of peaceful protesters. The Taliban have also imposed restrictions on protests.



The Taliban fire in the air to disperse a protest by Afghan women, December 2021 (Reuters/ Ali Khara)

In the north-eastern city of Jalalabad, at least three people were killed on 18 August 2021 and more than a dozen wounded after Taliban fighters [opened fire](#) during protests against the lowering of the national flag and raising of the Taliban flag. The Taliban also beat protesters and journalists.

In the city of Asadabad, in north-eastern Kunar province, the Taliban fired on a group of people celebrating Independence Day on 19 August 2021. Three people were reportedly killed and three others injured. On the same day in Kabul, an Independence Day protest was reportedly met with Taliban [gunfire](#).

On 4 September 2021, around a hundred women activists [gathered](#) close to the Afghan presidential palace in Kabul, carrying banners and chanting slogans for an equal society. To prevent them reaching the palace, Taliban security forces fired their weapons into the air, forcing protesters to flee the area. They used teargas and batons to disrupt the remainder of the protest. Some women were beaten by the Taliban during the protest.



A protest in Kabul on 7 September 2021 against Pakistan's support to Taliban forces, including airstrikes in Panjshir province, was [disrupted by the Taliban](#) who fired weapons into the air. A number of journalists were briefly detained, and some were reportedly ill-treated. The Taliban prevented dozens of women participating in the protests. On the same day, in similar demonstrations, the Taliban shot dead at least five protesters in the cities of Badakhshan and Herat, with dozens injured.

On 10 September 2021, the Taliban announced a [ban on all protests](#) in Kabul and other provinces without prior authorisation from the Justice and Interior Ministry. Despite the restrictions, protests by women activists persisted.

On 30 September 2021, a group of women gathered outside a high school in eastern Kabul demanding the right for girls to return to secondary school after the Taliban excluded them from classes earlier in the month. The Taliban violently [cracked down](#) on the demonstration, firing shots into the air and pushing back protesters.

At least 20 women took to the streets of Kabul on 21 October 2021 to demonstrate against the Taliban for not opening schools to girls. The all-women peaceful protest was staged in front of the Ministry of Education. Protesters were able to walk from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Finance. However, the protest was [disrupted](#) by the Taliban, who beat women protesters and forced them to disperse. According to the [International Federation of Journalists](#), the Taliban also beat several print and electronic media journalists to stop them covering the protest.

On 26 October 2021, around a dozen women organised another protest in Kabul, holding banners calling for their right to education and right to work. Taliban gunmen initially asked the protesters and media to move away. Taliban guards, mostly armed, [pushed back](#) journalists and confiscated the phone of a local reporter who was filming the protest.

A protest on 16 January 2022 was also disrupted by the Taliban. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), a group of women gathered in Kabul to demand rights to work and education. Armed Taliban members were already present when the women gathered, reinforcing organisers' fears that the authorities had infiltrated their communications. Some fled when they saw the Taliban, but about 25 women started marching to Kabul University as planned. Taliban members pointed firearms at the marchers, threatening and insulting them, calling them 'puppets of the west' and 'whores'. One protester said Taliban members also assaulted bystanders filming the protest and took their phones.

Around a [dozen women protested](#) in Kabul on 10 May 2022 against the Taliban's edict that females must fully cover their faces and bodies in public. After a short procession, the march was halted by Taliban fighters, who also obstructed journalists reporting on the event. According to [reports](#), the Taliban screamed at the protesters, calling them 'loose women with no morals or character'. They pointed guns and threatened to attack some of the protesters. The Taliban also [snatched phones](#) and ripped banners used during the protest. Some protesters were [detained](#) for two hours, questioned, threatened and warned that if they continued they would be imprisoned.



FORCED CONFESSIONS

According to reports in February 2022, the Taliban authorities appeared to be using another tactic to intimidate women's rights activists: [airing so-called confessions](#) in which women say activists based outside the country had told them to protest.

On 21 February 2022, a video was broadcast by the Interior Ministry of several women who stated that they have been 'encouraged by foreign-based activists to take to the streets by offering them the chance to relocate or send their children to study abroad'. The women also said 'they were not treated harshly'. They were part of a group of 29 women and their families who had disappeared from a safe house in Kabul.

Human rights groups believe that the Taliban extracted the so-called confessions under duress in an attempt to silence protesters and those who have challenged their human rights record.

MEDIA RESTRICTIONS

The Taliban have imposed [wide-ranging restrictions on media](#). According to Human Rights Watch, during a late September 2021 meeting with journalists in Kabul, the Ministry of Information and Culture distributed media regulations whose provisions are so broad and vague that they prohibit virtually any critical reporting about the Taliban.

On 28 March 2022, the Taliban [barred local broadcasters](#) from airing Pashto, Persian and Uzbek programming from British public broadcaster the BBC, the US Congress-funded broadcaster Voice of America and German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle. Before this, the Arezo, Ariana and Shamshad broadcasters aired programming from the BBC, TOLONews shared VOA programming and Ariana, Shamshad and TOLONews ran programming from Deutsche Welle.

The Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice [ordered](#) all women television presenters to cover their faces on 21 May 2022. After the order was announced, only a handful of news outlets complied. However, a few days later most female presenters were seen with their faces covered after the ministry began enforcing the decree.

JOURNALISTS AT RISK

Journalists are at increased risk following the Taliban takeover. Scores have been arrested, detained, tortured or ill-treated, or attacked for covering the situation on the ground.



News conference held by Deputy Prime Minister, May, 2022
(Reuters/Ali Khara)

In September 2021, the Committee to Protect Journalists [reported](#) that two armed men from the Taliban forcibly entered the privately owned radio broadcaster Salam Watandar's office in Kabul, demanding information concerning the broadcaster's employee contracts, finances, management systems and other administrative affairs.

In October 2021, freelance photographer Morteza Samadi was detained for three week weeks by the Taliban after he [covered a protest](#) in the western city of Herat.



In January 2022, armed Taliban authorities [detained](#) three journalists – Milad Azizi, Faisal Modaris and Idris Rahimi – who all work at the [Kabul Lovers](#) YouTube-based broadcaster which covers current affairs and daily life in Kabul.

In March 2022, Taliban forces in Kandahar [detained](#) Mirwais Atal, director of local independent broadcaster Zema Radio, after raiding his home. Atal was held for about 15 hours before being taken back to his home to retrieve his phone. He was then transferred to an undisclosed location.

On the same day, it was [reported](#) that Taliban intelligence agents in Kabul's District 1 had detained Sarwar Hashemi, a journalist with Salam Watandar, while he was covering a protest against school closures. Authorities interrogated Hashemi for around six hours before releasing him without charge.

In March 2022, the Taliban [detained six Kandahar radio journalists](#) for several hours and briefly shut down their stations for violating a ban on music. Taliban intelligence agents questioned the six journalists and released them only after their station managers agreed to stop playing music.

Some journalists have faced torture or ill-treatment by the Taliban. In August 2021, Taliban fighters [assaulted a reporter](#) with TOLO News, hitting him with their rifles and slapping and punching him in the face as he interviewed day labourers in the Shahr-e-Naw neighbourhood in Kabul.

In September 2021, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that Taliban security forces had detained two journalists from the Kabul-based media outlet Etilaat-e Roz. The reporters had been covering protests by women in Kabul demanding an end to Taliban violations of the rights of women and girls. The Taliban authorities took the two men to a police station in Kabul, placed them in separate cells and severely beat them with cables.

On 1 February 2022, a man who identified himself as a member of the Taliban's Directorate General of Intelligence (DGI) [arrested](#) journalist Abdul Qayum Zahid Samadzai, a reporter with the independent Pakistan-based 92News Media Group, in District 2 of Kabul. At the DGI's District 2 office, Taliban intelligence agents interrogated Samadzai, beat him and held him for around 36 hours. While in custody, agents repeatedly interrogated him in freezing rooms, slapped him, accused him of spying for foreign countries and pressured him to reveal the identities of other journalists who 'spy' on the Taliban.

On 24 May 2022, Ali Akbar Khaikhah, a photojournalist and reporter with the local Subhe Kabul newspaper, [disappeared](#) from the Kote Sangi area of District 5 of Kabul. Khaikhah told his family that he was going to the area to report but they could not find any information about him from hospitals, police districts or the Kabul police command. Khaikhah had recently conducted interviews with Afghan politicians for Subhe Kabul. He remains missing.

A Taliban military court in the western city of Herat [sentenced Afghan journalist Khalid Qaderi](#) to one year in prison in May 2022 for allegedly spreading anti-regime propaganda and committing espionage for foreign media outlets. Qaderi stated that he did not have access to a defence lawyer, and Taliban authorities forced him to sign a document agreeing not to appeal against the verdict.



SHUTTING DOWN OF KEY INSTITUTIONS

Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the Ministry of Women's Affairs – which had offices in Kabul and in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces – was [shut down](#), depriving women's rights groups of a key channel for survivors of gender based-violence seeking protection and services.



Office of the now dissolved national human rights body (asvakanews.com)

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has been unable to operate since August 2021. In October 2021 the Taliban [seized](#) its offices, saying an investigation had been launched into allegations of corruption against members of the Commission. The move came a day after the AIHRC issued a statement urging the Taliban to respect human rights and its independence and wellbeing of its staff. In May 2022, the Taliban [dissolved](#) the Commission saying it was 'not considered necessary'.

In November 2021, dozens of Taliban gunmen [stormed the offices](#) of Afghanistan's Independent Bar Association (AIBA) in Kabul, ordered its staff to stop their work and took control of the Association. A Taliban cabinet directive then stripped the AIBA of powers to license lawyers and required licence holders to reapply to the Ministry of Justice. In a letter to the UN Secretary-General, the International Bar Association said the move 'has completely compromised the independence of the legal profession in Afghanistan'.

CHALLENGES FOR ACTIVISTS IN EXILE

Activists who have fled Afghanistan, particularly those in Central Asia, Pakistan and Turkey, are experiencing various challenges, including running out of funds, expiration of their visas and a lack of programmes for resettlement. Many have been pushed back by embassies or told they need to register with the UN Refugee Agency and that it can take years before they are resettled. Some with expired visas are being deported back to Afghanistan. Many activists, especially those with children, are facing ever-growing economic difficulties and some are unable to pay for rent or food.

THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

In October 2021, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a [resolution](#) to appoint, for one year, a Special Rapporteur to monitor the status of human rights in Afghanistan. The resolution was introduced by the European Union (EU) and adopted with 28 votes in favour and 14 abstentions. Among the five states that voted against the resolution were China, Pakistan and Russia.

The UN General Assembly, in December 2021, indefinitely [postponed](#) international recognition of the Taliban government. The resolution adopted by consensus effectively held off any decision on recognition for at least 10 months.

In March 2022 the UN Security Council decided to [extend the mandate](#) of UNAMA for one year. Its highlighted tasks include the promotion of human rights.



In May 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, appointed in April 2022, undertook his first [visit to the country](#). Following his visit, he stated that Afghanistan was facing a plethora of [human rights challenges](#), but the Taliban have failed to acknowledge or address the magnitude and gravity of abuses.



UN in Geneva, September 2021 (REUTERS/Denis Balibouse)

In the same month, members of the [Security Council](#) expressed deep concern regarding the increasing erosion of respect by the Taliban for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls in Afghanistan. The council also expressed deep concern regarding the volatile situation in Afghanistan, including political, economic, social and security challenges and their impact on the lives of Afghan people, particularly the continuing terrorist attacks targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, including in religious minority communities.

In June 2022, the Security Council [removed](#) two education ministers from a sanctions exemption list. This now prevents them from travelling abroad. The move came after the Taliban backtracked in March 2022 on their pledge to open high schools for girls, saying they would remain closed until a plan was drawn up to reopen them in accordance with Islamic law. The Council agreed to extend the travel ban exemption for 13 Taliban leaders.

A [report](#) released by UNAMA in July 2022 echoes civil society's documentation of human rights violations, including summary executions and enforced disappearances of former members of the Afghan National Security Forces. UNAMA described how 'arbitrary arrests and detention of journalists, human rights defenders, [and] protesters have had a chilling effect on freedom of the media and civic activism'.

Following an Urgent Debate on the human rights of women and girls in Afghanistan in July 2022, brought by the EU and France, the Human Rights Council passed a consensus [resolution](#) affirming its commitment to equal rights for women in Afghanistan and calling for representative participation in an organised dialogue on the issue at the next Council session. The resolution also called upon the Taliban in particular 'to reverse the policies and practices that currently restrict the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Afghan women and girls' and 'for measures to ensure that local women's rights organisations and local organisations led by women can continue to carry out their work'.

However, all these efforts have fallen short of the calls made by Afghan civil society activists over the year for the UN to [establish](#) a fact-finding mission or similar independent investigative mechanism on Afghanistan, [end all exemptions](#) for sanctioned Taliban leaders if there is no progress on human rights and increase efforts to provide urgent support and protection for all Afghan human rights defenders, including those in exile.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the international community

- Publicly urge the Taliban to respect human rights, including fundamental freedoms in line with international human rights law and standards.
- Call on the Taliban to ensure all people in Afghanistan can exercise their rights to the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, and end the harassment, abuse, arbitrary arrest and detention of all protesters.
- Take proactive steps to provide immediate practical support and protection to human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists at risk.
- Provide Afghan human rights defenders in exile with financial, diplomatic and political support, including by issuing humanitarian visas and effective funding resettlement programmes.
- Create an enabling environment conducive for all Afghan refugees and asylum seekers to recover from the psychosocial pressures they endured in Afghanistan and the anxieties they may experience settling in a new country.
- Ensure that UNAMA has a robust mandate to monitor and report on human rights and has the resources and capacity to extend its reach, and support local organisations to carry out their human rights work.
- Call on the Taliban to reinstate the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Women's Affairs.
- Continue to support, strengthen and sufficiently fund the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and urge the Taliban to co-operate fully with the mandate.
- Support efforts to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law, international humanitarian law and other serious human rights violations, including gendered dimensions of such violations and abuses, by all parties in Afghanistan, via the establishment of an independent investigative mechanism, such as a fact-finding mission or commission of inquiry, mandated by the UN Human Rights Council.
- Call on the UN Security Council to facilitate inclusive, intra-Afghan peace talks with the effective representation of human rights defenders, particularly women and representation from all ethnic groups, and include guarantees of safety and effective and equitable representation of views.
- Offer strong political and practical support to the International Criminal Court's investigation on Afghanistan and provide adequate resources to allow the Office of the Prosecutor to investigate all crimes perpetrated by all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan.
- Ensure that political recognition and representation is not extended to Taliban-affiliated authorities.