

# AFGHANISTAN: CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS  
TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





## INTRODUCTION

On 15th August 2021, the Taliban [seized power](#) in Afghanistan after the government collapsed and two weeks before the US was set to complete its troop withdrawal. Taliban fighters [swept into](#) Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, facing little resistance from Afghan government forces.

Fearful that the Taliban would carry out revenge attacks against those who worked with the US or the government and reimpose the harsh interpretation of Islamic law, Afghans [rushed](#) to leave the country. While some activists, journalists and others who were at risk of reprisals from the Taliban because of their work were able to leave the country, others have gone into hiding.

A special session of the UN Human Rights Council was called by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on 24th August, with the support of Afghanistan and a number of UN Member States. Despite urgent requests from civil society to establish an international monitoring and accountability mechanism in response to rights abuses and to prevent a looming humanitarian crisis, the [resolution](#) adopted fell short of this bare minimum request and failed to effectively address the escalating human rights emergency in the country.

On 30th August, the UN Security Council passed a resolution that [called](#) for the Taliban to facilitate safe passage for people wanting to leave Afghanistan, allow humanitarian access to the country and uphold human rights, including for women and children.

On 7th September, the Taliban announced [an all-male Afghan cabinet](#) and [abolished](#) the country's Ministry of Women's Affairs. Of the 22 new ministers, 17 are on the UN [sanctions list](#), including the head of the government.

Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has since [reported](#) on civilian casualties and human rights abuses as a result of the fighting in the Panjshir valley. There are numerous credible allegations that the Taliban are conducting house-to-house searches looking for specific government officials and people who cooperated with US security forces; reprisal killings of a number of former Afghan security personnel; and reports of civilians who worked for previous administrations and their family members being arbitrarily detained. In contradiction of assurances that the Taliban would uphold women's rights, women have instead been progressively excluded from the public sphere over the past month.

## TALIBAN TARGETS ACTIVISTS, CREATING A CLIMATE OF FEAR

Activists are facing [systematic intimidation](#) throughout the country. As the Taliban takes over territories, its members seek out women activists in their own homes to interrogate them and their families and demand to look at their work. This has created a climate of significant fear.

Added to this are [reports](#) that the Taliban are going to local mosques to ask people if they are aware of

## ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The CIVICUS Monitor is a research tool that provides quantitative and qualitative data on the state of civil society and civic freedoms in 196 countries. The data is generated through a collaboration with more than 20 civil society research partners, and input from a number of independent human rights evaluations.

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

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#) rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [Afghanistan](#) as “**Repressed**”.



activists, journalists or anyone else who has worked with foreigners, including with NGOs. The Taliban are reportedly working with corrupt police officers to obtain details about activists and journalists.

Activists who spoke to CIVICUS reported that between 16th August and 13th September 2021, the Taliban conducted raids on women-led NGOs across Afghanistan; in some cases, they confiscated their vehicles and sealed their offices. In a Western province, a prominent woman rights defender reported that the Taliban was now in control of her office and using it as a military post. They also destroyed the equipment in the office and are using the NGO's vehicles.

On 13th September, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [reported](#) that they had also received information regarding Taliban raids on offices of some non-governmental organisations and civil society groups.

## EXCESSIVE AND LETHAL FORCE USED TO QUASH PROTESTS

Following the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, thousands of people, especially women, have taken to the streets in anti-Taliban protests and to 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.

In the north-eastern city of Jalalabad, at least three people were killed on 18th August 2021 and more than a dozen wounded after Taliban fighters [opened fire during protests](#) against the group for taking down the national flag and raising 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 19th August. Three people were reportedly killed and three others injured. On the same day in Kabul, an Independence Day protest was met with a [heavy volley of gunfire](#) by the Taliban.

On 4th September, 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 from reaching the palace, Taliban security forces [fired](#) their weapons into the air, sending protesters fleeing. They used tear gas and batons to disrupt the remainder of the protest. Some women were [beaten](#) by the Taliban during the protest.

On 7th September 2021 a protest in Kabul against Pakistan's support to Taliban forces, including of 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. Dozens of women were [prevented](#) from participating in the protests by the Taliban. On the same day, at least five protesters were shot dead by the Taliban in the cities of [Herat](#) and [Badakhshan](#), with dozens injured.

There were also [reports](#) that during a demonstration held by several women, including activists and human rights defenders, in Faizabad city in Badakhshan province on 8th September, the Taliban fired in the air and allegedly beat several of the protesters. A small group of women who had gathered to protest elsewhere in Kabul was violently dispersed as the Taliban fired shots into the air over their heads. The same day, women were violently dispersed during protests in Kapisa and Takhar provinces, and several women's rights activists in Kapisa were detained.

On 10th September 2021, the Taliban announced a [ban on all protests](#) in Kabul and other provinces in Afghanistan without prior authorisation from the justice and interior ministry. According to the UN, a day later the Taliban [ordered](#) telecommunications companies to switch off access to the internet on mobile phones in specific areas of Kabul.



## JOURNALISTS AT RISK

Journalists have been at increased risk following the Taliban takeover. They have been attacked for covering the situation on the ground, and their homes raided. At least 14 journalists were detained by the Taliban while covering protests in Kabul in early September 2021, according to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#). Of those journalists, at least nine experienced violence while in detention.

On 9th August 2021, suspected Taliban militants kidnapped [Nematullah Hemat](#), a reporter for the privately-owned news channel Gharghasht TV. Hemat's whereabouts remain unknown. The group also shot and killed Toofan Omar, a manager of the privately-owned radio station Paktia Ghag Radio.

On 18th August, the Committee to Protect Journalists [reported](#) that Taliban militants have searched the homes of at least four journalists and news agency employees. This includes at least three employees of the German public broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW). The employees were not in their homes at the time of the raids and have gone into hiding. Taliban militants also searched the home of a freelance journalist and interpreter who formerly worked with freelance U.S. journalist Wesley Morgan.

Taliban fighters hunting a DW journalist [reportedly](#) shot dead a member of his family and seriously injured another. The Taliban were conducting a house-to-house search to try to find the journalist, who now works in Germany.

On 25th August, Taliban fighters [assaulted a reporter](#) working for the privately-owned broadcaster TOLO News, hitting him on the back and waist with their rifles and slapping and punching him in the face as he interviewed day labourers in the Shahr-e-Naw neighbourhood in Kabul. When he identified himself as a journalist, the Taliban continued to beat and insult him.

On the same day, Taliban fighters [detained](#) a reporter and camera operator working for the privately-owned Pakistani news channel Khyber News while the two were reporting in Kandahar city. The two were released on 27th August.

On 7th 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. Both men were released on 8th September and received medical care at a hospital for injuries to their backs and faces. There have also been [reports](#) of the Taliban asking women journalists in the government-owned media platforms not to come to work.





## THE FOLLOWING ARE RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Publicly call on the Taliban to respect human rights, including fundamental freedoms in line with international human rights law and standards.
- Take proactive steps to provide immediate practical support and protection to human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists at risk.
- Prioritise providing safe passage and travel documents for Afghan human rights defenders at heightened risk of persecution from the Taliban because of their past work or status, along with their immediate family members.
- Create an enabling environment conducive for all Afghans who flee to recover from the psychosocial pressures they endured in Afghanistan and the anxieties they may experience settling in a new country.
- Increase support for civil society groups inside and outside of Afghanistan that promote human rights. Governments should ensure the participation of Afghan civil society groups in discussions on assistance and resettlement.
- The UN Security Council should seize the current opportunity to quickly restart the stalled intra-Afghan peace talks. These talks must ensure effective representation of human rights defenders, especially women. Participation must include guarantees of safety and effective and equitable representation of views.
- Establish an independent and gender sensitive Human Rights Council mechanism to investigate human rights violations on the ground and further accountability.
- Pledge new support for civil society groups inside and outside of Afghanistan that assist with refugee resettlement, and otherwise promote humanitarian and human rights needs.