



# INTIMIDATION, REPRESSION AND CENSORSHIP

## The Status of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression in Afghanistan

MAY 2024



رواداری  
RAWADARI

Rawadari is an Afghan human rights organisation that aims to deepen and grow the human rights culture of Afghanistan, ultimately reducing the suffering of all Afghans, especially women and girls. Rawadari helps build an Afghan human rights movement, monitors human rights violations, and pursues justice and accountability for violations. Rawadari works with individuals and collectives inside and outside Afghanistan.

# CONTENT

- 4 Introduction
- 5 Methodology:
- 6 Part One - The Situation of Access to Information**
- 6 The absence of a legal mechanism to guarantee access to information:
- 8 Methods of providing information in the Taliban government
- 9 Imposition of extensive restrictions on access to information:
- 10 Arrest, threat, and torture for providing information related to human rights violations
- 11 Inspection and control of libraries
- 12 Administrative corruption and lack of accountability
- 15 Part Two: Freedom of Expression and Media**
- 16 Abolishment of legal frameworks guaranteeing freedom of expression
- 17 Reduction in the number of media outlets and journalists
- 17 Restrictions imposed on the presence of women in the media
- 19 The imposition of extensive restrictions on freedom of press
- 21 Methods of control and suppression
- 21 Arrest, torture, and killing of protesters
- 23 Harassment, detention, and torture of journalists
- 23 Failure to address cases of violence against journalists
- 24 Part Three: Conclusion and Recommendations**
- 24 Conclusion:
- 25 Recommendations:



# INTRODUCTION

Since the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, hundreds of media outlets in the country have been forced to cease their activities, and thousands of journalists, both men and women, have either lost their jobs or migrated to different countries, leading to the closure of civic space. This report focuses on the status of access to information and freedom of expression in Afghanistan since 15 August 2021 and covers major relevant developments in these areas till 31 March 2024.

The Taliban have systematically and intentionally imposed restrictions on the right of access to information and the right to freedom of expression since their return to power in 2021. Actions such as the suspension and annulment of previous laws, exerting pressure on media support organizations, and imposing unjustified limitations on access to information are among the most significant measures taken by the Taliban. Consequently, currently active media outlets in Afghanistan, which previously played a crucial role in promoting freedom of speech and the free flow of information, have lost their independence and freedom of operation. Furthermore, due to the prevailing atmosphere of fear and oppression in the country, citizens have been deprived of their right to freely express critical views.

**The Taliban have revoked and suspended laws that included the right to access information and freedom of expression, and currently there is no effective legal mechanism to protect media outlets and journalists against interference and intimidation. This has led to widespread violation of the right to freedom of expression and access to information and has eliminated the ability of citizens to participate in government decision-making that impacts their lives.**

The findings of this report indicate that the Taliban, with complete disregard to Afghanistan's international human rights commitments and the country's pre-Taliban laws, have engaged in suppressing freedom of expression and media using various tools and methods, particularly imposing unlawful and discriminatory restrictions on women journalists. Currently, only a few women journalists are working with the media, conditional upon fully complying with the conditions set by the Taliban's Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of vice (MPVPV).

**In addition to this, the Taliban have engaged in persistent harassment and intimidation of media, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, the detention and killing of protesters and imposing extensive restrictions on the activities of libraries, bookstores, and publishers.**

The provincial departments of MPVPV, Ministry of Information & Culture (MoIC), General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), and Police Directorates are among the key institutions involved in suppression of freedom of expression and access to information. The Taliban have also dismantled accountability mechanisms such as independent judiciary, independent anti-corruption bodies and prevent media's access to information on national budget expenditure, thus leading to administrative and financial corruption.



# METHODOLOGY

Rawadari's team conducted interviews with 264 individuals, including 61 women, in 28 provinces<sup>1</sup> of Afghanistan (out of 34) to gather information related to the status of freedom of expression, media, and access to information in the country for the purpose of this report. Restrictions imposed on women's education, employment, and mobility has limited Rawadari's access to female interviewees.

**Victims and their family members, eyewitnesses, journalists and staff of national and local media, civil society activists, employees of government entities, relevant non-governmental organizations and institutions, heads and staff of media support organizations, librarians, bookstore owners, publishers, YouTubers, and users of social media networks, both men and women, have been interviewed for this report.**

Additionally, previous reports of Rawadari and other reports and publications related to the status of freedom of expression and access to information published by various organizations have also been utilized. The decrees, documents and other information published by the Taliban have also been reviewed and where relevant included in this report.

The findings of Rawadari indicate that citizens' access to information has become increasingly difficult in Afghanistan. This is because the Taliban have imposed strict regulations and restrictions in this area, particularly preventing the dissemination of information related to human rights violations using various tools and methods of pressure, fear, and intimidation. **We have verified that the de-facto authorities have threatened media, journalists, victims, eyewitnesses, and their relatives to refrain from sharing and disseminating information about human rights violations.** It is within this context that in the current report, details about the identity of interviewees, as well as the exact date and location of certain events have deliberately been withheld to ensure the security of sources.

Considering the existing restrictions on access to information and the environment of fear and intimidation, the violations of the right to freedom of expression and access to information might be more widespread than the cases verified by Rawadari and included in this report.

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<sup>1</sup> Kabul, Ghazni, Herat, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Logar, Farah, Bamiyan, Daikundi, Nangarhar, Kunar, Maidan Wardak, Faryab, Jawzjan, Panjshir, Takhar, Khost, Badakhshan, Balkh, Baghlan, Laghman, Kapisa, Paktia, Paktika, Ghor, Zabul, Parwan and Helmand

Photo: Sohrab Omar



## PART ONE

# THE SITUATION OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION



Photo: Sohrab Omar

**Access to information is a fundamental human right identified in international human rights conventions. According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also guarantees the right to access information<sup>3</sup>.**

These treaties and conventions obligate member states to refrain from creating any unjustified obstacles to the realization of this right and to adopt and implement necessary measures and conditions to ensure citizens’ access to it. However, with their return to power, the Taliban have systematically and intentionally restricted access to information, which will be elaborated on in the upcoming discussions.

## **THE ABSENCE OF A LEGAL MECHANISM TO GUARANTEE ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

Under the laws of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, access to information was guaranteed as a human right for Afghan citizens. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, in line with international human rights principles, recognized this right. Additionally, in 2014, the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan approved the Access to Information Law with the aim of facilitating access to information, ensuring transparency, and strengthening the culture of accountability. However, with the Taliban’s return to power, they abolished the Afghan Constitution and effectively suspended the implementation of other related laws, leading to the absence of a clear and effective legal framework for guaranteeing access to information.

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<sup>2</sup> The United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, Article 19

<sup>3</sup> The United Nations General Assembly, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19, Paragraph 2



The de-facto Ministry of Information and Culture has stated that the Access to Information Law has been amended and has been sent to Taliban's Supreme Leader in Kandahar for approval, while media leaders and journalists say that they are unaware of the content of these "amendments" and have not been consulted on them.

Furthermore, the Taliban have dissolved mechanisms facilitating access to information, for instance the Access to Information Commission has been disbanded. This Commission, established based on the Access to Information Law, consisted of five members, including both women and men, and its main tasks included monitoring the access to information mechanisms of government offices and promoting a culture of information sharing<sup>4</sup>.

However, now that nearly three years have passed since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, access to information has faced increasing restrictions and obstacles. The de-facto government officials do not consider themselves legally obligated to provide information to citizens in the absence of a clear legal framework and enforcing institutions.

## METHODS OF PROVIDING INFORMATION IN THE TALIBAN GOVERNMENT

The Taliban share information with the public and media unilaterally and mainly through informal means. Typically, the Taliban officials communicate announcements, orders, and other information to the media via WhatsApp, and the media are expected to publish it without having all the relevant details. For example, Taliban governors in Helmand and Kandahar provinces have instructed all departments to refrain from taking photos or videos of meetings and decisions. According to this directive, journalists are restricted from obtaining visual reports from government offices. In Helmand, the Taliban's Information and Culture Directorate shares information with the media through voice messages on WhatsApp, and this is the only means of communication and sharing information with the media in this province.



<sup>4</sup> Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Justice, Access to information Law, Enacted in 2014, Article 18





The Taliban also hold press conferences, primarily in Kabul, but often there no opportunity or space for critical questions. There are rarely any de-facto government press conferences in the provinces. Additionally, the Taliban have activated spokesperson and media departments in some of the offices under their control, particularly in Kabul. The governors' offices, GDI, and security commanders' offices in the provinces also have media units or spokesmen. These media departments mainly provide information to the media about their achievements and natural incidents. Based on the findings of this report, the media are obliged to cover this information in their news programs without having the right to question or search further. In some provinces, the Information and Culture Departments operate as the Spokesperson's office for all the provincial government units.

The Taliban also use state media to disseminate information to the public. The Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, Ministry of Information & Culture and General Directorate of Intelligence control the content of the state media.

## IMPOSITION OF EXTENSIVE RESTRICTIONS ON ACCESS TO INFORMATION

From August 2021 until now, the Taliban have issued multiple decrees, guidelines, and oral orders to impose restrictions on access to information. According to these orders, the dissemination of any kind of information without prior coordination with the relevant authorities is prohibited, and media outlets are not allowed to publish it.

Based on the findings of this report, **the Taliban prohibit publishing news and information related to human rights violations, security and political events, attacks by opposing military fronts, disputes among Taliban factions, conflicts between nomads (Kuchis) and residents over pastures and agricultural lands, the expenditure of the national budget, information related to administrative corruption, news about murder, detention, and imprisonment of employees of the previous government, journalists, and human rights defenders, violence against women, specially cases of forced and underage marriages, information related to crimes committed by the Taliban, and protests. Media coverage of these issues can lead to severe consequences such as harassment, detention, and torture of journalists.** The journalists are only allowed to disseminate information favourable to the Taliban. The GDI, the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, and the Department of Information and Culture oversee media activities and prevent the dissemination of news and information that Taliban perceive as sensitive or controversial.

**On the 21 February 2024, the De Facto Prime Minister's Office instructed all institutions under its command to refrain from publishing without prior permission any orders, decrees, and other important documents issued by the "Supreme Leader" and the Prime Minister's Office in the media, social networks, and WhatsApp groups.**<sup>5</sup> In another example, in Khost, the Police Department has released a letter to journalists, media workers and social media users to refrain from sharing information about any security incidents without clear permission from the police. Additionally, according to the findings of this report, journalists and media outlets must obtain written permission

<sup>5</sup> Islamic Emirate of Taliban, Office of the Prime Minister, Decree No 420, publication date 21 February 2024



from the Department of Information and Culture to interview local Taliban officials and must specify in advance their areas of inquiry.

## ARREST, THREAT, AND TORTURE FOR PROVIDING INFORMATION RELATED TO HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Since their return to power, the Taliban have systematically prevented the dissemination of information related to human rights violations. **Rawadari has documented cases of journalists, eyewitness and relatives of victims who have been detained, imprisoned, and tortured for providing information and interviews to the media and human rights organizations.** Some victims and eyewitnesses have reported that the Taliban have threatened them to prevent them from sharing of information with the media and human rights organizations. The Taliban have also detained and imprisoned several local journalists for publishing information about human rights violations.<sup>6</sup>

**On 26 July 2022, the Taliban's GDI arrested a local journalist in Maimana city of Faryab province, for preparing a report on cases of human rights violation. After a few days, he was released from prison with mediation of local elders. While detained, he was subjected to torture and mistreatment.** In another case in the same province, the Taliban arrested and imprisoned a social activist in August 2022 for disseminating information about human rights violations. Furthermore, Rawadari has documented cases in Kandahar where families of victims were forced to leave their neighbourhood and go in hiding, after receiving warnings and threats from the Taliban to not provide information to the media and human rights organizations.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, a civil society activist from this province told Rawadari that due to an interview with a television network about human rights violations, the Taliban visited his house at night and threatened him with death.

The Taliban have prohibited the dissemination of information related to human rights violations, including targeted killings and extrajudicial executions, even by the families and relatives of the victims. There are numerous cases where families of victims or local journalists have been detained and imprisoned for providing information to the media about such incidents. **The Taliban intelligence and information departments have warned local journalists and media outlets to refrain from covering targeted killings of former government officials. As a result, media outlets within Afghanistan are currently unable to report on such incidents.** The Taliban closely monitor media outlets and journalists to prevent any dissemination of information on these matters. **A source from Helmand province shared that the Taliban's information and culture department has renewed the media license for his organization conditionally, contingent upon refraining from publishing reports related to human rights violations and providing a written commitment in this regard.**

<sup>6</sup> Rawadari, Afghanistan Human Rights Situation Report 2023, Published in March 2024 <https://rawadari.org/020320241765.htm/>

<sup>7</sup> Rawadari, Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan: Mid year report 2023, Publication date: August 2023 <https://rawadari.org/120820231648.htm/>



Photo: AFP/Wakil Koshar

## INSPECTION AND CONTROL OF LIBRARIES

After seizing power in Afghanistan, the Taliban have imposed extensive restrictions on the activities of libraries and publishers across the country. During this period, dozens of libraries and in various parts of the country have been closed due to the Taliban's strict regulations as well as financial difficulties.

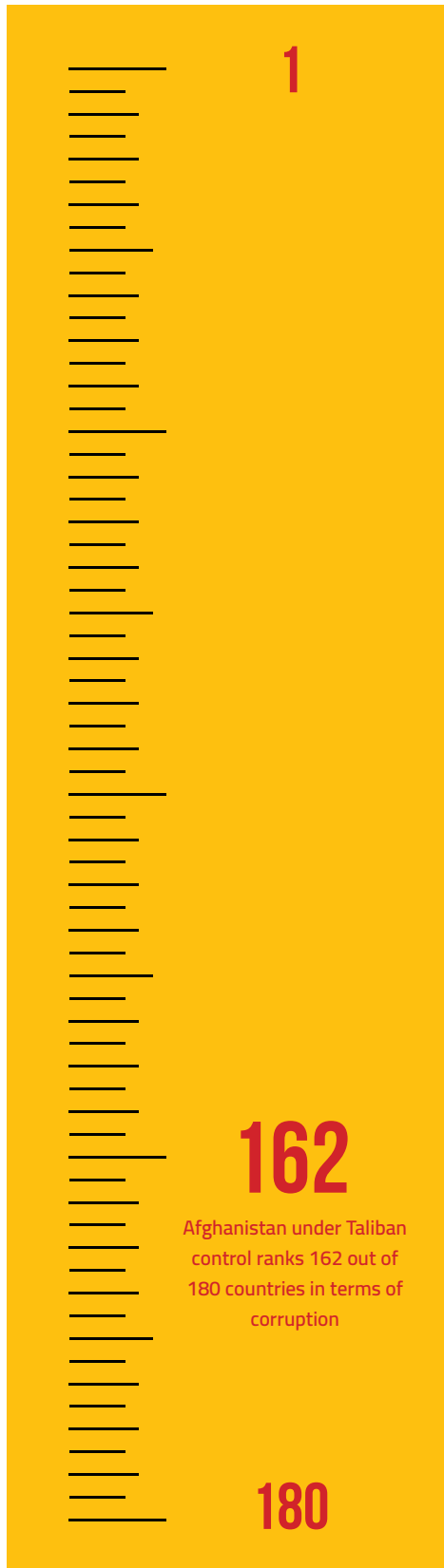
Based on the findings of this report, the Taliban have prohibited the distribution, sale, and stocking of certain books, publications, and literary and artistic works, and so far, they have inspected all libraries, both state-owned and privately owned libraries. According to the documents obtained by Rawadari, printing, selling, and distributing books related to Shiites, books printed in Iran, especially those written on reforming religious thought, have been prohibited in some provinces. Additionally, **the Taliban have banned the printing, sale, and distribution of books on the history of ethnicities in Afghanistan, books about Mujahidin leaders and other Taliban opponents, books about Salafists as well as books and articles against the Taliban and ISIS. The owner of a bookstore in Kabul told Rawadari that the Taliban have prepared a list of at least 100 book titles, and employees of the Department of Information and Culture and the MPVPV, regularly monitor and inspect libraries and bookstores and collect the banned books.**

In the provinces of Faryab, Jawzjan, Baghlan and Balkh, the Departments of Information and Culture, GDI, and MPVPV are taking away from the bookstores and libraries the books printed in Iran, books related to the Shi'ism, and books written against the Taliban. Similarly, in Kapisa province, the Taliban have ordered all bookstores and publishers not to print and disseminate books that are contrary to Sharia. **In Kunduz province, the Taliban have taken away from bookstores any books related to the history of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, as well as books written about Mujahidin leaders, while in Bamiyan province, they have taken away the books on the history of the Hazaras.** Currently, there are no active bookstores in Daikundi province, and the GDI has even taken written commitments from printing houses not to copy and print documents contrary to the Taliban's policies without their permission. **In January 2024, the Taliban arrested the manager of a library in Nangarhar province on charges of distributing banned books and publishing critical poems.**

Furthermore, the findings of this report indicate that in the provinces of Kandahar, Zabul, and Helmand, the activities of libraries have been greatly restricted. Several libraries have closed due to



lack of visitors and financial hardship. The bookstores in these provinces are only allowed to sell war stories and religious books. Additionally, authors in Helmand are required to submit the content of their books to a commission appointed by the Department of Information and Culture for approval prior to publication.



## ADMINISTRATIVE CORRUPTION AND LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Access to information is important because it helps promote transparency and reduce financial and administrative corruption, as well as enabling citizens of the country to effectively participate in decision making that affects their lives. However, contrary to what the Taliban always claim, there are evidence of corruption at both high and low levels of the administration under their control, particularly in the judicial and legal sectors. Findings of international watchdogs indicate that Afghanistan remains one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The Transparency International stated in its latest report, that Afghanistan under Taliban control ranks 162 out of 180 countries in terms of corruption.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the Taliban's restrictions on access to information, only a portion of the administrative corruption is exposed. The Taliban do not allow the media to disclose information related to administrative corruption. Additionally, currently there is no legal and effective mechanism for monitoring the performance of the Taliban and, consequently, ensuring transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to public.

**A source from Helmand province told Rawadari that the Taliban conceal information from the public claiming that the Islamic system they have established in Afghanistan is divine and they are not obliged to respond to the people in any way. Because in their belief, Islamic regimes are only accountable to Allah.**

The Taliban withhold information regarding the expenditure of national budget and details of development projects. **An informed source from Kabul told Rawadari that the Taliban mostly award contracts for developmental projects to their own affiliated companies without following legal**

<sup>8</sup> BBC 30 January 2024 <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c80n718y6xeo>



**procurement procedures, but the media are not allowed to publish reports and information relevant to this matter.**

Likewise, the media and citizens cannot obtain information from the Taliban regarding the utilization of the national budget, this is specially concerning considering the unlimited powers of the Supreme Leader of this group and the expenditures of his office. For example, interviewees from Farah province told Rawadari that if anyone seeks information about the expenditure of the national budget from Taliban offices, they are accused of spying because the Taliban claim that the details of national budget expenditure are confidential information that should not be accessible to public.

Additionally, extortion and abuse of power is a common practice in the Taliban administration. **For example, GDI detains individuals on the charges of carrying weapons and imprisons them, then releases them upon receiving hefty payments. Additionally, there are cases where the Taliban demand money from the families of detained individuals in exchange for their release. In one instance, in December 2023, the Taliban detained an individual in Kabul on charges of document forgery and then asked his family for a sum of 200,000 Afghanis (equivalent of 2774 USD) to release the individual.**

In addition to this, another matter is the collection of ushr, usually tithe on the harvest, and zakat, wealth tax, for which the Taliban have no specific criteria. Various departments, including Ministry of Hajj, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, police stations and municipalities, each extort as much money as they under the labels of ushr and zakat. For example, in the provincial centre for Daikundi province, the Taliban have created 6 security zones, each of which, in addition to collecting between 30,000 to 35,000 Afghanis (equivalent of 416-485 USD) in ushr and zakat, also obtain other resources such as winter fuel from the local residents.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, various sources from Kabul have told Rawadari that the Taliban, outside the legal process and unofficially, sell a passport for 1,000 USD. It was alleged that in Daikundi province in 2023, the Taliban's Provincial Director for the Ministry of Economy demanded \$5,000 from NGO to grant them permission for implementation of a project. There are also allegations that the local officials take portions of humanitarian aid for their personal use. For example, out of the 250 family packages, 50 is allocated for the head of Red Crescent, 25 for the governor's office, and 50 for the GDI and police offices, leaving only 125 shares for eligible individuals. A resident of Raghistan district of Badakhshan province has stated that he was beaten when he asked the local Taliban about the amount and expenditure of revenue of the gold mines in the district. Residents in this province have claimed that the revenue from the gold mines of Raghistan and Kohistan districts and the lapis mines of Keran wa Minjan district are pocketed by the local Taliban officials. The gold mines in Kohistan and Raghistan are being illegally mined by Mawlawi Najib, the former deputy governor of Badakhshan and current police chief of Laghman and people affiliated with commanders Qari Fasihudin and Mawlawi Amanudin are mining the previous gems in several districts.

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<sup>9</sup> Rawadari, Repression, Regression and Reversals. One year of Taliban rule and human rights situation in Afghanistan. Published December 2022: <https://rawadari.org/10122022196.htm/>



Given the prevailing atmosphere of repression and intimidation in the country, where media freedom is curtailed and citizens cannot access important information, there are broader concerns and allegations about corruption in Taliban administration that is beyond the scope of this report.



Photo: Sohrab Omar

Photo: Sohrab Omar



**PART TWO**

# **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND MEDIA**

Photo: AFP/Bulent Kilic



Freedom of expression is among the most important human rights, guaranteed in the international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. According to Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, everyone has the right to freedom of expression and can express their opinions without interference and hindrance from others. This right includes freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, orally, in writing, or in print, or through any other media of choice.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the right to freedom of expression is a necessary precondition for the realization of other aspects of human rights, and governments have a duty to ensure it by adopting appropriate executive and legal measures while respecting this right.

However, the Taliban, disregarding their international human rights obligations, have abolished previous laws guaranteeing freedom of expression and freedom of the press, imposing extensive restrictions such as censorship, strict control over media content, and restrictions on the appearance and attire of media workers.

## **ABOLISHMENT OF LEGAL FRAMEWORKS GUARANTEEING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

Upon returning to power, the Taliban abolished the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and dissolved other legal mechanisms guaranteeing freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Currently, they have suspended the implementation of the Mass Media Law, which was adopted to protect and ensure freedom of expression, support journalists' rights, and provide conditions for the free operation of media.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, currently, there is no law in place to ensure freedom of expression and supports the free operation of media in Afghanistan. Instead the Taliban have gradually increased restrictions on

<sup>10</sup> The United Nations General Assembly adopted International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1966

<sup>11</sup> The Islamic republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Justice, Mass Media Law, enacted on the 25 June 2009





freedom of expression through orders and strict enforcement. GDI, MPVPV and MoIC employees monitor and control the activities of media outlets and social media users. This situation has led to the closure of hundreds of media outlets, including print, audio and visual media. Additionally, the Taliban's violence against journalists has led to self-censorship and repression of active media.



## REDUCTION IN THE NUMBER OF MEDIA OUTLETS AND JOURNALISTS

Since Taliban's return to power, hundreds of media outlets, including print media, TV channels and radios have been closed across the country both due to Taliban restrictions and lack of funding. As reported by the Afghanistan Journalists' Center, following the fall of the Islamic Republic

of Afghanistan government and the Taliban's return to power, approximately half of the 600 active media outlets in the country have been closed due to the imposed restrictions and lack of funding.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, in the past 31 months, a significant number of journalists have lost their jobs or have been forced into exile due to security threats, pressure, and suppression by the Taliban, and the closure of media outlets. Those journalists who have been unable to leave the country are mostly living with economic hardship.

## RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED ON THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

The Taliban have imposed extensive and unlawful restrictions on the presence and role of women in the media. Only in certain parts of the country, namely in provinces of Kabul, Herat, Ghazni, Uruzgan, Jawzjan, Kandahar, Laghman, Nangarhar, Badakhshan and Bamiyan a limited number of women continue to work in the media under conditions set by the Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Wearing the black veil and observing the Taliban enforced Hijab are among the prerequisites for women's presence in the media. Furthermore, woman journalists are not allowed to co-host programs with their male colleagues or interview Taliban officials, nor can they participate as reporters in public programs such as press conferences in some of the provinces.



Photo: Sohrab Omar

12 . Afghan Journalists Centre, 2 May 2023 :<https://afjc>



Similarly, in some provinces including Ghazni and Badakhshan provinces, women can only participate in religious and health programs on radios. On the 20 November 2021, the Taliban's Information and Culture Directorate in Ghazni province announced a ban on women's presence in the media. However, as a result of advocacy by media support organizations, later the officials reversed the ban with the condition that women could take part in the media only if they fully observe the desired hijab approved by the MPVPV and they can only participate in running religious and health programs on radios. In Kandahar province, the Taliban restricted women's presence in local media two years ago, and now only 5 women work in the education and awareness sections of local media and 2 women work as producers in programs related to women. These women media workers mostly work from home. A high-ranking Taliban official in this province told a media activist not to speak about the restrictions imposed on the activities and presence of women in the media because it is an "Islamic issue" and is based on the verbal order from the Taliban Supreme Leader.

**The Taliban's Information and Culture Directorate in Helmand province has instructed the media to refrain from interviewing women and airing women's voices. In Helmand province, the Taliban stopped the broadcast of a UNICEF message about Polio that was recorded in a woman's voice. On the 28 February 2023, the Taliban detained two YouTubers from Badakhshan province because in one of their programs, they had interviewed women who hadn't covered their faces with masks. The head of a media outlet in Kabul told Rawadari that women reporters are expected to fully cover their hair and even if a single strand of hair is shown from a woman reporter on TV, the head of that media outlet is summoned and threatened by the Taliban.** He also stated that the GDI has instructed media outlets to not invite to their programs as interviewees and guests, the women rights activists and women who criticize Taliban policies and live outside Afghanistan.

In most parts of the country, the Taliban have not allowed women to work with the media. For example, **in Parwan province, the Taliban have threatened local media outlets that if they recruit female reporters, they will face legal consequences. The GDI has summoned media heads in this province several times and has taken commitments from them not to recruit female reporters. The MoIC in Badakhshan summoned the head of a local media outlet several times and threatened forced closure unless women employees were fired. Subsequently, the media outlet fired the women employees and now only men work for this media.** Similarly, local officials in Kapisa province have verbally ordered that no woman should work in the media. In the Southeast region, women are banned from working with the media and airing of their voices is prohibited. Similarly in Central region, women have not been allowed to work in the media.

In addition, over the past nearly three years, the activities of dozens of print, visual, and audio media outlets managed by women have been suspended. The Taliban have closed down two local radio stations for women in Farah province have warned women in this province to not work with media. Additionally, they have closed down two local radio stations for women in Kandahar and Helmand provinces. **Furthermore, the Taliban have instructed media outlets in some provinces not to publish any reports on events attended by women and that women are not allowed to participate or ask questions in live media programs except for religious programs.**



## THE IMPOSITION OF EXTENSIVE RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF PRESS

Based on the international human rights documents, any imposition of restrictions on freedom of expression and the press must be legitimate and legal, meaning that the limitation placed on the exercise of this right should be based on law and the needs of a democratic society.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, any action to impose illegitimate restrictions is contrary to the provisions of the international human rights law and constitutes a violation of human rights.

Since August 2021, when the Taliban seized power, they have systematically suppressed freedom of expression and the press. Currently, all active media outlets in Afghanistan have had their independence and freedom curtailed due to the prevailing atmosphere of repression and intimidation. They cannot publish independent and critical reports due to the Taliban intimidation and censorship. Compliance with the Taliban policies is a prerequisite for media's operation in Afghanistan. Additionally, according to issued directives, any type of reporting and analytical program is subject to coordination and prior approval by the Taliban's Ministry of Information and Culture. The Taliban's information and cultural department has instructed media outlets to invite Taliban representatives instead of independent and critical analysts for their analytical programs. **On 22 November 2021, the defacto MPVPV issued a directive instructing media outlets not to interview analysts critical of Taliban policies and to refrain from inviting them to media.**

**On 9 September 2022, the Taliban's Director of Information and Culture department in Daikundi province, in a meeting with journalists, quoted Mullah Haibatullah, the leader of the group, as saying that no media outlet has the right to criticize the Taliban, and any media outlet that dares to do so will be punished, and their activities will be suspended.** In another instance, in January 2022, the Taliban's intelligence chief in this province warned the media that if they publish news and reports against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, they will be arrested and imprisoned.

The suppression of freedom of expression was one of the first areas of action for Taliban since they took power in 2021. The Taliban declared a ban on broadcasting of music and TV series and advertisements featuring women. They also prohibited the production of video reports from Taliban offices. Subsequently, the publication of human rights violations and investigative and critical reports was banned as well. Moreover, over the past nearly three years, the Taliban have suppressed and censored media content extensively, employing various tools and methods to prevent the dissemination of topics contrary to their interests. The ban includes the publication of news related to political and security issues, coverage of human rights violations, citizens' complaints against the Islamic Emirate, news coverage of crimes committed by the Taliban, coverage of protests, Nowruz celebrations, activities of the National Resistance Front and Freedom Front, prohibition of interviews between men and women, and the prohibition of showing women's faces in the media. These are among the most significant measures implemented and enforced by the Taliban during this period.



**Additionally, a source from Helmand province told Rawadari that media outlets in the province are required to sign a written document containing prohibitions on publishing topics such as human rights, women's rights, and democracy in order to obtain or renew their operating licenses.**

There are many instances where the Taliban have suspended media outlets for violating these regulations. For example, on 11 March 2023, Taliban officials in Badakhshan halted the activities of a local woman's radio station for simultaneously broadcasting a Naat (religious song) and music, and also for having female employees. On the 29 September 2023, the GDI in coordination with the department of Information and Culture, the MPVPV and the department of Higher Education, halted the activities of a private media outlet in Daikundi province and detained three of its journalists. The media outlet was accused of disregarding the orders of the local Taliban government regarding the coverage of achievements of the Islamic Emirate.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, Taliban suspended the Websites of some of the independent media that operated with the .af domain (thus the Taliban had access and control for suspension) . 8AM Daily Newspaper and Zawia Media websites on .af domain were suspended in 2022.

**In Baghlan province, the Taliban have verbally banned the publication of critical reports and programs, and media outlets and journalists who have defied this order have been threatened and interrogated. Additionally, the Taliban's Information and Culture department in this province warns journalists in all meetings held with them to refrain from covering news related to the National Resistance Front and the Freedom Front, and has warned that the violators will be subject to prosecution.**

In Farah province, the Department of Information and Culture of Taliban has told all media outlets that if they want to continue operating, they must avoid taking positions against the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban and align their programs with the de facto authorities' policies and demands. Journalists in Ghor province have been instructed not to publish any reports contrary to the will of the Islamic Emirate, and media officials in this province must coordinate and consult with the Taliban before publishing any reports. Source in Nimruz Province have told Rawadari that the Director of MoIC in the province repeatedly emphasizes in meetings with media to refrain from publishing reports that questions the Taliban's governance.

The media outlets in Afghanistan are currently obligated to unquestionably adhere to the policies of the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban and cannot operate contrary to their demands. In addition to facing intimidation and censorship, media workers and journalists have faced arrests and torture in the hands of the Taliban.



## METHODS OF CONTROL AND SUPPRESSION

The Taliban have utilized various methods and tools to control and compel media outlets to adhere to their policies. **The GDI, the MPVPV and the MoIC have all been involved in forcefully curbing the independence and freedom of the media. They have resorted to coercion, threats, intimidation, violence, detention, and imprisonment of journalists.** In certain regions of the country, such as in the Eastern provinces, the department of Information and Culture of Taliban has established WhatsApp groups for local media outlets and journalists, requiring them to coordinate and seek approval from GDI, the MPVPV and the MoIC before publishing their reports and programs.

**The MoIC in other parts of the country, including in the provinces of Bamiyan and Daikundi, have established joint media committees. In each meeting, they decide on the operation of local media and emphasize the necessity of aligning with the policies of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Sources have told Rawadari that in these meetings, local authorities instruct media outlets on which topics to cover and which issues to avoid.** In the South-eastern region of the country, the departments of Information and Culture have formed Media Violations Commissions, consisting of representatives from media outlets and media support organizations. The main mandate of the Commission is to monitor the activities of media outlets and prevent the dissemination of programs contrary to the policies and views of the Taliban.

Additionally, the Taliban have established specialized sections within the GDI in some provinces to monitor the activities of social media users, journalists, and other individuals. **Sources from Ghazni province told Rawadari that a unit has been set up in the GDI to track the activities of social media users, and they have compiled a list of specific individuals to monitor on social media. The main task of this unit is to identify, detain, threaten or intimidate the critics of the Taliban who are on social media platforms.**

Furthermore, the findings of this report indicate that the GDI, the MPVPV, MoIC and provincial police commanders are the main perpetrators of media suppression and the arrest and imprisonment of journalists. These agencies control media utilizing any means available.

## ARREST, TORTURE, AND KILLING OF PROTESTERS

While the right to criticize is a fundamental aspect of freedom of expression recognized by international documents for all individuals, the Taliban do not tolerate any form of protest or criticism and seek revenge against their critics. Since August 2021 many individuals have been detained, torture and killed for criticizing and freely expressing their opinions, thoughts, and civic demands. The de facto authorities have repeatedly stated that expressing any critical viewpoint regarding the current situation and speaking about problems will be perceived as undermining the credibility and status of the Islamic Emirate and therefore warrants punishment. They consider opposition to themselves forbidden and even consider the killing of opponents as an obligation. As Mawlawi Neda Mohammad Nadim, the former Taliban governor for Kabul, had stated, they will spare no effort to eliminate



opponents to the policies of the Islamic Emirate.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, over the past nearly three years, the Taliban have labelled their opponents and critics as “rioter” and suppressed, threatened, detained, tortured, and even killed them.

**In Parwan province, the Taliban have repeatedly demanded that media outlets and journalists refrain from publishing critical reports. They have summoned the heads of the three active media outlets in this province to the GDI several times and have made them commit to not to criticize the Taliban.**



Some social media users have told Rawadari that they have been summoned to police stations and detained by the Taliban for expressing opinions and posting critical posts. For example, in Farah province, during the first months of their rule, the Taliban detained and tortured 31 individuals on charges of criticizing the Islamic Emirate on social media. Additionally, 8 women protesters in Balkh, involved in organizing protests against the Taliban, were mysteriously killed in 2021.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, local sources from Faryab province have stated that the local Taliban officials always emphasize to the media and citizens that any criticism of their performance is considered a crime and those who commit it will be punished.

**On the 4 April 2023, a university professor in Badakhshan province was detained and spent a week in prison for criticizing the Taliban’s closure of schools and universities to girls and women. Similarly, in February 2024, the GDI arrested and imprisoned two residents of Balkh province who had criticized the Taliban on Facebook. In another incident, on April 2023, a resident of Daikundi province, who** had asked male students not to attend classes in protest against the ban on girls’ education, was detained by the GDI and spent four days in prison. He told Rawadari, “The Taliban put a plastic bag over my head and two of them beat me with sticks all night, demanding that I should reveal who supports me.” **Also, in June 2023, a resident in Marjah district of Helmand province, who had criticized the ban on women’s education at a school graduation ceremony, was detained by the Taliban and later released with a guarantee. In another case in the same province, the Taliban imprisoned ten local residents for criticizing the Taliban’s leader, Mullah Haibatullah.** In another case, in April 2023, a civil society activist from Kandahar province was detained for 20 days by the GDI for posting a critical post on his Facebook page about the closure of schools for women and girls.

<sup>15</sup> The Daily Hasht-e-subh, 9 June 2022: <https://8am.media/fa/taliban-governor-in-kabul-opponents-of-the-taliban-regime-must-be-killed/>

<sup>16</sup> Rawadari, Repression, Regression and Reversals. One year of Taliban rule and human rights situation in Afghanistan. Published December 2022: <https://rawadari.org/10122022196.htm/>



Based on the findings of this report, each of the de-facto government ministries and departments feels authorized to take action against and detain citizens who criticize the Taliban. For example, the municipality in Maimana city in Faryab province, detained a citizen who had complained about the Taliban mayor's negligence in one of the media outlets.

## HARASSMENT, DETENTION, AND TORTURE OF JOURNALISTS

Based on the findings of this report, the Taliban have extensively engaged in harassing, detaining, and torturing journalists. The charges against these journalists include publishing critical reports, covering security events, women's gatherings and protests, as well as reporting on military attacks by the National Resistance Front and the Freedom Front. **For instance, on 15 December 2022, the Taliban GDI detained and tortured a journalist from Takhar province on the charges of publishing critical reports against the Taliban. Similarly, on 7 April 2022, a journalist from Kandahar province was detained by the Taliban while visiting a hospital to report on a security incident and was held there for three hours.**<sup>17</sup>

On 9 September 2021, two journalists from Parwan province were detained by the Taliban while they were in Panjshir province to cover the fighting between the Taliban and the National Resistance Front. The Taliban arrested these journalists on charges of spying for their opponents and released them after one day in custody. Additionally, in January 2022, the Taliban Police Directorate in Ghazni province detained and tortured the deputy head of the Journalists' Union. **On 10 August 2023, the intelligence department detained two journalists from Nangarhar province on the charges of publishing a critical report, broadcasting music and conducting journalism training courses. They were released after 32 days. They were released with guarantees and were made to promise that they won't share their experience in prison with media or human rights organizations.**

The Afghanistan Journalists Center has stated that during 2023, at least 213 cases of violence, threats, and detention of journalists have been recorded, indicating a 68% increase compared to 2022.<sup>18</sup>

## FAILURE TO ADDRESS CASES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS

As mentioned in previous sections, with their return to power, the Taliban have systematically and intentionally suppressed freedom of expression and press freedom, and during this period, they have committed widespread harassment, mistreatment, and violence against journalists. In the meantime, the legal mechanisms that supported journalists against violence and intimidation have been dismantled and the activities of media support organizations have been severely restricted. As a result, journalists in Afghanistan currently lack the possibility to register and follow up on their complaints, and the justice system does not take legal action to address the violence perpetrated against journalists. Although some media support organizations are present in Afghanistan, the Taliban have severely limited their freedom and authority, and these organizations cannot support the media and journalists against the unlawful actions of the de facto authorities.

17 Rawadari, Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan: Mid year report 2023, Publication date: August 2023 <https://rawadari.org/120820231648.htm/>

18 Afghanistan Journalist Center, 2 May 2023: <https://afjc>

AP Photo/Hussein Malla



**PART THREE**

# **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**





## CONCLUSION

The Taliban have systematically restricted freedom of expression and access to information in Afghanistan. They have pressured the media to adhere to their policies and demands using orders, suspensions and closures of media outlets and threats, intimidation, arrests, detention and torture of journalists and media workers. Currently, there is no legal mechanism to guarantee freedom of expression and access to information and prevent the violation of these fundamental human rights. The Taliban, disregarding their commitments to international human rights obligations, control the media through creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. The Taliban GDI, MPVPV and MoIC have a key role in enforcing restrictions and violating the rights to freedom of expression and access to information.

As with all Taliban restrictions, women have been particularly and disproportionately impacted. From 100s of women media workers and journalists, only a few have been able to continue their work in certain parts of the country, conditional upon strict compliance with the regulations imposed by the MPVPV. In some provinces, in addition to the ban on women working with media, the media are prohibited from broadcasting women's voices.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this report and in order to address the dire situation of freedom of expression and access to information in Afghanistan, Rawadari makes the following recommendations.

### A – to the international community:

- Taliban's restrictions on freedom of expression and right to information aims to stifle any civic resistance and demand for accountability and helps sustain their exclusionary and discriminatory policies against women and girls. Reversal of bans on access to information and freedom of expression should be one of the key conditions for considering Taliban's demands for normalization by the international community.
- The international community should exert meaningful pressure on the Taliban to restore and enhance the legal framework for protection of the right to access to information and freedom of expression.
- We call on international media support organizations, human rights organizations, and the international media to support media and journalists in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on women journalists, through effective, international advocacy for their protection and rights and offering protection grants.
- We urge the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan to engage with the de facto authorities to prevent harassment, intimidation, arrest and detention of journalists and media workers and to release detained journalists and media workers.



### B – To the de facto authorities:

- We call on the de-facto authorities to act in accordance with Afghanistan's international human rights commitments and remove all restrictions imposed on women journalists and media workers, and women-owned media outlets, and to end their discriminatory policies.
- We call on the de-facto authorities to abide by Afghanistan's international commitments regarding the protection of freedom of expression and access to information, and to lift the restrictions imposed on the activities of media.
- We call on the de-facto authorities to respect the right to access information and freedom of expression by fully enforcing all previous relevant laws ensuring the independence and free operation of media and protection for journalists.
- We call on the de-facto authorities to uphold their promises for eliminating corruption, ensuring transparency, accountability, and responsive in their administration, and to not obstruct access to information.
- We call on the de-facto authorities to respect the legal authority of media support organizations and to remove the restrictions imposed on their activities.
- We call on the de-facto authorities to release all detained journalists and stop the harassment, intimidation, detention and imprisonment of journalists and media workers.

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