



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Afghanistan

17 October 2025

Context

Before the second Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021, Afghanistan's civil society was vibrant and active. Activists and journalists were vocal stakeholders in public life, and their work had brought about notable progress in civic rights and fundamental freedoms. The right to protest and freedom of expression were broadly upheld, the head of state was democratically elected, and the 2004 Constitution defined the nation's legal framework. Women were active participants in society as lawyers, politicians, doctors, judges, etc.

However, after the Taliban takeover, the country suffered an immediate and intentional deterioration of its civil and political space. The Taliban, now de facto authorities, routinely target civil society with detentions, torture, beatings and [harassment](#). Several members of civil society have also been killed since the Taliban takeover, but families are often wary of blaming the Taliban publicly for fear of putting themselves in greater [danger](#). The Taliban have also marginalised political parties and ethnic minorities, persecuted former government officials and prosecutors, and dismantled the legal frameworks and institutions developed in the past two decades to promote and protect human rights. Now, the Taliban's Supreme Leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, rules by decree and has the final say on all key policy decisions, albeit with their interpretation and implementation varying considerably between provinces. Afghanistan's environment for civil society is now completely constrained. Political parties are banned, the media faces extensive restrictions, and absolutely no criticism of the de facto authorities is permitted. The Taliban's General Directorate for Intelligence (GDI) arrests anyone who dares to exercise their fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association, or assembly.

The situation for CSAs is further strained by Iran's and Pakistan's deportations of Afghan CSAs and their family members. Since October 2023, Pakistan has deported over 950,000 Afghan refugees and migrants under the Illegal [Foreigners' Repatriation Plan \(IFRP\)](#). CSAs who took refuge in Pakistan claim that the deportations put their lives at serious risk, as the de facto authorities [persecute them for their work once they return to Afghanistan](#). Between 22 June and 22 July 2025, [Iran deported more than 918,000 Afghans](#). CSAs who have been deported in these waves become extremely vulnerable to [being targeted by the Taliban upon return](#), which, compounded with poverty, threatens their livelihoods and the continuation of their work.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression in Afghanistan have been systematically eradicated since 2021. Although immediately after the Taliban takeover, HRDS, including WHRDs and journalists, could sporadically gather in protest and denounce the Taliban's treatment and human rights violations, the increase in targeted violence against civil society actors has made it impossible for the continuation of their work. Detentions, harassment, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), beatings, and

torture against activists, journalists, religious scholars and academic professionals have been widely reported since 2021, a trend that persisted over the last 12 months.¹

Civil society members are subject to arbitrary detention and are often held incommunicado, and with no due process. Most members of civil society who are detained are transferred to unknown locations, are kept in complete isolation, and are subjected to violence; their families remain entirely uninformed about their condition. [WHRDs are at grave risk of being subjected to SGBV while in custody](#). Additionally, detainees have very limited access to legal representation, and there is a lack of safeguards and protection against torture. A [UNAMA](#) report supports all these findings.

For example, on 14 November 2024 the Taliban [arrested a social activist](#) in Takhar province for collecting donations to rebuild a school. He was reportedly tortured during a 17-day interrogation and then transferred to the central prison. Internal reports indicate that he was released on bail in December after submitting a guarantee letter to the Taliban's intelligence department that he would not continue with his human rights work. [Testimonies from former detainees](#) and their relatives indicate that the Taliban have made the practice of demanding guarantee letters to prevent people from working in human rights increasingly widespread.

In addition to arrests and beatings, media outlets routinely face harassment and threats from the de facto authorities, driving them to self-censor. Towards the end of 2024, several outlets were pressured to end television broadcasts showing living beings and to broadcast in radio format instead or risk being shut down. Closures related to this rule were reported in Daykundi, Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, Kunar, Khost, Takhar, Badghis, Panjshir, and Laghman provinces. In September 2024, the de facto authorities released [new regulations governing the broadcasting of debate programmes](#). They issued a list of 64 pre-approved analysts who media outlets were permitted to interview, and stipulated that debates should not be done live, but must be recorded and approved before broadcasting. All these incidents show the de facto authorities' systematic eradication of civil society's fundamental freedoms.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

Until 2021, the 2004 Constitution guaranteed and protected the fundamental freedoms that enabled the work of civil society actors, including freedom of expression, association, and assembly. However, with its suspension (in 2021), the legal foundation safeguarding NGOs and HRDs effectively disappeared, increasing the security risks for civil society actors and undermining accountability of the de facto authorities. Women previously played a huge role in civil society, but with gender-based limitations, including the December 2022 ban on women working in NGOs, the restrictions on movement and the dress code, as well as the criminalisation of protest and resistance, their role in civil society has greatly diminished. While some local-level agreements mean a heavily reduced number of women have managed to continue their work in the humanitarian sphere, the Taliban leadership continues to look for avenues to clamp down on even these exceptions.

¹; See for example <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/20/afghanistan-women-protesters-detail-taliban-abuse>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/afghan-professor-jailed-after-protesting-restrictions-women>; <https://rukshana.com/en/two-professors-were-detained-and-tortured-in-herat/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/jul/03/video-appears-to-shows-gang-rape-of-woman-in-a-taliban-jail>

The de facto authorities published the PVPV law on 21 August 2024, which formalised the operations of the Taliban's so-called morality police, among other things. The law represents a move by the Taliban's deeply conservative leadership to ensure full enforcement of its interpretation of Sharia law. It has had direct and real consequences for Afghan women's ability to work, as the new morality police patrol the streets and stop and sometimes detain Afghans who they consider to be infringing Taliban rules, like hijab violations or commuting without a mahram. For example, according to a briefing given to the [UN Security Council in December by Tom Fletcher, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator](#), incidents of Afghan women humanitarian workers being blocked from attending their work increased from 22% to 47% between September and December 2024.

Additionally, in October 2024, the Ministry of Economy introduced a new licensing policy for NGOs, establishing a three-year validity period for NGO licences (previously, licences had no expiration date). This decree increases the risk of NGOs losing their legal status and enables the de facto authorities to apply the policy in a discretionary manner, using it as a control mechanism rather than as a genuine effort to streamline procedures or curb corruption. Moreover, the decree increases the administrative and financial burdens on NGOs and raises the risk of operational disruptions due to incidental non-compliance.

This decree was followed by a 26 December 2024 announcement that NGOs employing Afghan women would have their licences revoked. This was a clear move to undermine civil society actors' work and to further restrict women's access to employment in the humanitarian sector.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

In the current global and local context, it is incredibly difficult for CSOs in Afghanistan to [access sustainable resources](#). Hundreds of organisations have closed since the Taliban takeover, and dozens of projects have been [suspended or closed down during 2025](#).²

Because of Afghan civil society's reliance on international funding, the current environment of aid cuts in the US and Europe has been devastating. In particular, the USAID funding freeze in February 2025 had a severe impact on Afghanistan's enabling environment, as dozens of NGOs and CSOs that depended on US support were forced to suspend projects and lay off staff. Given that the United States accounted for [43.9%](#) of all humanitarian aid to Afghanistan in 2024, the freeze resulted in an excessively constrained funding landscape. While the most visible impact has been on humanitarian organisations, CSOs working quietly in the field of human rights, media work and community activism have also been impacted.

When such groups do manage to secure funding, it comes at great personal risk because of the de facto authorities' criminalisation of civil society activities and the assumption that anyone receiving foreign funding is collaborating with 'external enemies'. Dozens of HRDs, CSAs and media workers have been detained in connection with such charges. One [CSA who disappeared in August 2025 is reportedly being detained in connection with receiving funds](#)

² https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/tracking-impact-report-ban-and-other-restrictions-women-ngos-ingos-and-un-eleventh-snapshot-march-2025?_gl=1*fn49xh*_ga*MTc0MTQ4MTY0Ni4xNzUyOTg5OTUy*_ga_E60ZNX2F68*czE3NTI5OTU2Mzc6bzlkZzEkdDE3NTI5OTYwMzAkajYwJGwwJGgw;https://rsf.org/en/taliban-takeover-40-afghan-media-have-closed-80-women-journalists-have-lost-their-jobs

[from UNAMA for civil society activities](#), despite the fact that UNAMA operates openly in Afghanistan with the supposed agreement of the de facto authorities.

CSOs that are able to receive funding through informal channels are also at great risk as they must operate under the radar and rely on the continued availability of the money service providers within these informal channels. If their funding channels are compromised, not only will they no longer be able to fund their activities, but they also face the threat of detention and torture by the de facto authorities.

Accessibility and availability of sustainable funding resources in Afghanistan range from limited to non-existent. Those that are available are limited in accessibility, with most funding going to different UN entities and large international humanitarian organisations. The funding that reaches local CSOs from international donors comes with onerous administrative burdens on the organisations. With outsized reporting, monitoring, and compliance requirements and unrealistic expectations on the workload for local teams and the results that can be achieved in the current operational context, teams are pushed to deliver according to disconnected donor expectations and perceptions.

There are consistent reports of the de facto authorities interfering with aid distribution in several provinces. These incidents can come in the form of bribery solicitations, diversion of funds, aid confiscation, or pressure to hire relatives of Taliban officials.³

4. State openness and responsiveness

The Taliban rule by decree and in an authoritarian manner. While in the early months of their return to power there remained some opportunities for civil society to enter into discussions with Taliban officials, this is no longer the case. The Taliban leadership rejects all criticism and dismisses any civil society activities as foreign interference.

Interaction between civil society and the de facto authorities in Afghanistan is characterised by intimidation, harassment and occasional coercion. In addition to the structural administrative and operational barriers faced by CSOs as outlined above, women, LGBTIQ persons, and ethnic and political minorities have been completely sidelined from all decision-making processes, for example on local councils or within state institutions.

The [August 2025 UN Gender Alert](#) explains that leadership at the national and sub-national levels remains entirely male, and that, although Afghan women have sought informal avenues to inform decision-making, their attempts are only advanced when the topics are less sensitive, such as economic or humanitarian crises, climate change, and aspects of the private sector.

These concerning developments have to some extent been enabled by the international community. The de facto authorities were invited to a series of meetings with international envoys on Afghanistan, held in Doha, Qatar. During the various rounds of meetings, the Taliban demanded that no Afghan women be allowed to attend the key sessions and that issues of fundamental importance, such as girls' access to education, be excluded from the agenda. [The United Nations \(including UNAMA\) ultimately agreed to these conditions](#), and

³ See for example <https://rukshana.com/en/corruption-continues-under-taliban-rule-with-aid-reaching-fewer-people-in-need/>; <https://8am.media/eng/taliban-forces-seize-un-cash-aid-from-balkh-province-women-at-gunpoint/>; <https://8am.media/eng/partiality-in-aid-allocation-by-community-representatives-women-are-deprived-of-receiving-humanitarian-assistance/>

has since continued to allow these exclusions. The working groups that were established since the last Doha meeting do not include women except on the sidelines. Also, recently, as India was handing over the Afghan embassy in India to the Taliban, they excluded women journalists from the press conference.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

The portrayal of civil society in Afghanistan has shifted drastically over the past four years. Before the Taliban takeover, civil society actors were recognised as key contributors to Afghanistan's development after the 2001 war and as catalysers of progress. However, since 2021, the Taliban has reshaped public discourse about CSAs, both to close the enabling environment and to justify their oppressive governance. The de facto authorities deem anyone who speaks up about their abuses as being [anti-Islam](#) and/or being [paid by foreign countries](#) to weaken traditional Afghan values.

In December 2024, Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada called foreign organisations spies, while in September 2025, the newly appointed police chief of Kabul's 3rd district [labelled journalists as 'traitors'](#) and lamented that many had fled abroad before the Taliban had chance to kill them. In July 2025, the Taliban issued a [directive that prohibited the media from criticizing the regime's policies](#), and that any publication that undermines "national unity" or "Islamic values" will face severe penalties. Since media coverage is highly restricted, civil society actors' contributions are rarely, if ever, covered, and media outlets that do transmit them risk being raided, shut down, or fined. This is further compounded by the fact that many CSAs have had to go into hiding to avoid being persecuted.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

In Afghanistan, access to a secure digital environment is highly restricted and the de facto authorities have been gradually expanding their capacity to surveil and curtail Afghans' digital activities.

The scale of controls on the digital environment was underscored by the de facto authorities' blocking of internet access in September 2025. On 15 September reports emerged that the internet had been cut off in some government offices in Kabul and across the entire province of Balkh. Between 16 and 21 September, the de facto authorities blocked fibre optic cables in the provinces of Kunduz, Takhar, Badakhshan, Nangarhar, Herat, Parwan, Kandahar and Helmand. This was followed by a nationwide internet outage from 29 September to 1 October. While local officials explained the outages as being linked to 'preventing immorality', the outages restrict Afghans' access to information, prevent people from communicating with people, both inside and outside Afghanistan, and form part of a wider trend of censorship, government surveillance, and harassment in the digital space.

Numerous internal reports indicate that [social media influencers](#) and [individuals who criticize the de facto authorities](#) online have been unlawfully [arrested](#). For example, on 21 May 2025, Taliban intelligence agents arrested Mawlawi Abdul Qadir Qanit, a prominent cleric and former head of the Council for the Protection of Religious and Jihadi Values, in Kabul. This was the fourth time he had been detained, with no official charges announced. Sources report that

Taliban forces also raided his home and confiscated his phone. Previous arrests appear to have been linked to his public criticism of Taliban policies and televised remarks questioning their authority.

The de facto authorities regularly establish security checkpoints where civilians' mobile phones are searched for evidence of criticism against the Taliban. In one recent example, on 8 October the Taliban's morality police were inspecting people's phones at checkpoints throughout the western city of Herat. In addition to physical searches, in September the de facto authorities ordered telecommunications companies to share Afghans' user data with the intelligence agency and implement a system in which certain keywords would be immediately flagged to Taliban officials.

Censorship is also pervasive across digital platforms in Afghanistan. In March 2025, the de facto authorities in Farah province banned the broadcast of any images depicting living beings on the local branch of the national public television network. This decision followed the suspension of the women's radio station Radio Begum in February. According to [Reporters Without Borders](#), in 2024, 12 media outlets were closed. The little information available on digital platforms is often false. A [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) report indicates that the Taliban have been purposefully deploying sophisticated bots to flood social media with pro-Taliban ideas. They also control 15 major television and radio programmes, as well as newsletters.

Challenges and Opportunities

The outlook for the enabling environment in Afghanistan is bleak. Based on trends from the previous year, the main challenges for the enabling environment are:

1. **Further restrictions on internet access** - The Taliban will likely continue to leverage connectivity to control the population. The internet is the main communication and information tool for Afghans, so internet outages or blockages are very impactful. Such disruptions not only affect the general population's ability to access news and services but also have a disproportionate impact on CSAs who rely on online platforms for coordination, advocacy, and the organisation of civic activities. WHRDs are especially reliant on online platforms because of the multiple layers of restrictions imposed on them. Beyond immediate operational challenges, sustained restrictions could exacerbate isolation, limit the dissemination of critical information, and weaken the capacity of CSAs to monitor human rights abuses or mobilise communities effectively. Additionally, internet blockages disrupt the information-sharing between local actors on the ground and international CSOs monitoring the situation in Afghanistan, undermining efforts to ensure accountability.
2. **The funding environment** - With major donors redirecting funds to other geopolitical priorities, there is little prospect of meaningful improvement, at least not for the next two years. This funding uncertainty not only threatens the continuity of existing programmes but also constrains the emergence of new initiatives.
3. **CSAs being caught up in ongoing deportations of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan** - Neighbouring states will continue deporting Afghan refugees, despite this being a clear violation of the principle of non-refoulement. For CSAs, deportation carries a particularly high risk, as they become extremely vulnerable to being targeted by the Taliban upon return, as these individuals often lack the protection, resources, or networks to mitigate the threat.
4. **The growing normalisation of relations between the Afghan de facto authorities and the international community** - This will embolden the Taliban to continue their

campaign of abuses against CSAs and women, further constraining the operating environment for those advocating for accountability, equality, and human rights.

That said, accountability mechanisms provide potential opportunities to raise awareness about the human rights crisis:

1. Due to the campaigning efforts of Afghan civil society, at the 60th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the European Union tabled a [resolution](#) that called for the establishment of an independent investigative mechanism (IIM) that was approved unanimously without a vote. This [mechanism](#) will “(...) collect, consolidate, preserve and analyze evidence of international crimes and the most serious violations of international law, including those that may also amount to violations and abuses of international human rights law, committed in Afghanistan (...)”. The IIM will at least provide an opportunity to raise awareness about the scale of the human rights crisis in Afghanistan, and to push back against the above-mentioned normalisation of relations between the de facto authorities and the international community.
2. There is also an ongoing international [campaign to recognize the systematic oppression of women and girls in Afghanistan as gender apartheid](#). A coalition of international and Afghan groups, including [Human Rights Watch](#) and the [International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute](#) (IBAHRI) are calling for the codification of the crime of gender apartheid in international law. While this will be a lengthy process and would not necessarily bring about short-term change on the ground in Afghanistan, it would be another potential source of leverage in the ‘All Tools’ approach being pursued by those working on human rights advocacy on Afghanistan. This approach aims not only to increase pressure on the Taliban, but also on those members of the international community that are pushing for greater normalisation.

This publication was funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



EU SEE

SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



Funded by
the European Union

