

The Collapse of the Civic Space in Afghanistan and Supporting the Fight to Reclaim it

POLICY BRIEF

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Introduction

Civil society activity in Afghanistan has been significantly constrained since the Taliban regained control of the country in August 2021. Recent reports confirm that Taliban authorities have implemented repressive orders and a crackdown targeting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors, including women’s movements and development and humanitarian organizations promoting human rights.ⁱ Taliban officials have raided and searched the offices of NGOs, frozen their bank accounts, halted their programs, and barred female staff from going to work.ⁱⁱ They have throttled freedom of association, assembly, and expression.ⁱⁱⁱ Activists who dare speak out against the regime have faced surveillance, imprisonment, detention, abduction, and death.^{iv} The Taliban has quelled peaceful protests through excessive force, including using live ammunition and subjecting demonstrators to electric shocks, tear gas, and beatings with whips and cables.^v As a result, many NGOs have shut down, and civil society in Afghanistan has all but lost its ability to conduct advocacy, research, and otherwise influence the country’s political and social processes. According to CIVICUS Monitor, a tool that tracks civil society freedoms worldwide, the civic space in Afghanistan has gone from “repressed” to “closed,” the lowest possible designation.^{vi}

This policy brief analyzes how the Taliban has constrained the civic space in Afghanistan. It then explains how some Afghan NGOs have responded and continued their activities, despite the repressive Taliban crackdown. It concludes with recommendations for steps the international community can take to better support Afghan NGOs and civil society. In addition to desk research, this brief is based on discussions and interviews with personnel of NGOs and human rights experts inside and outside of Afghanistan. It draws on a series of high-level roundtable discussions convened by the Afghanistan Policy Lab at Princeton University’s School of Public and International Affairs with leading Afghan civil society figures, representatives from UN agencies, journalists, and international NGO staff. Its analysis is also based on primary source interviews with human rights leaders in Afghanistan. Some interviewees’ names and other identifying information have been changed to protect them from possible reprisals.

The Closing of the Civic Space

For 20 years before the Taliban returned to power, Afghan civil society organizations were crucial in advocating for human rights, public sector transparency, and changes to laws and government policies. Today, however, they face significant political, legal, financial, and operational barriers. The Taliban authorities have asserted absolute power and stopped nearly all civil society activity. They have barred civil liberties, such as freedom of association, assembly, and expression.^{vii} At the same time, Afghan NGOs have been abused by the regime, lost financial and material support from donors and international organizations, been forced to abandon activities supporting human rights, and ordered to exclude women from their operations.



Freedom of association

The Taliban authorities have flagrantly prevented Afghan civilians from associating freely. Officials have forced the dissolution of many NGOs and interfered with others, imposing discriminatory policies, making excessive demands for reporting, limiting their work areas, and levying taxes. NGOs are restricted from engaging in activities related to human rights, peacebuilding, democracy, justice, the rule of law, and eliminating violence against women, among other things. The Taliban strictly monitors NGOs, and has deployed security forces to interfere with their activities. Many women-led NGOs reported that their female directors, board members, and bank signatories were forced out by the Taliban.^{viii} The Taliban regularly and often without warning, raids NGO premises, demanding the names and contact details of the staff, affiliated individuals, and documents.^{ix} The Taliban go so far as to harass, detain, and perpetrate violence against NGO staff. According to a report on human rights in Afghanistan by a UN Special Rapporteur, 76 humanitarian workers were arrested by the Taliban in 2022 (as of October).^x All of this repression has severely chilled voluntary associations in Afghanistan. Those NGOs that have not closed their doors (or been forced to close them) have replaced full-time and permanent jobs with contract-based positions that typically lack social protections and employment security.

Freedom of assembly

The Taliban has failed to respect the right to peaceful assembly. In the face of non-violent protests organized in different parts of the country on various social and economic issues, the regime has responded with force, harassment, unlawful detention, and coerced confessions.^{xi} The Taliban has imposed restrictions limiting people from coming together, whether in a gathering, meeting, or campaign, to collectively express, promote, pursue, and defend their rights. Not long after taking power, the Taliban banned demonstrations, requiring all protests to obtain prior authorization from the Ministry of Justice.^{xii} Those who fail to get permission face severe consequences. The Taliban has restricted nearly all forms of assembly, not just protests. In late 2022, Taliban officials broke up a press conference in Kabul and detained Zarifa Yaqubi, a women’s rights activist, and four of her male colleagues.^{xiii} There have been cases where the Taliban attended meetings hosted by NGOs to vet the agenda, the number of participants, whether females were accompanied by male guardians, and the dress code.^{xiv}

Freedom of expression

The Taliban has stifled freedom of expression and speech through intimidation, harassment, abduction, and detention. According to the World Press Freedom Index, Afghanistan was downgraded from 122nd to 156th in 2022 when it came to freedom of expression.^{xv} As of August 2021, the Afghanistan Journalist Center recorded at least 245 cases against freedom of media, including 130 cases of detention.^{xvi} The latest came on March 27, 2023, when the Taliban arrested Matiullah Wesa, the founder of Pen Path—a local NGO and a prominent human rights defender.^{xvii} The Taliban have issued “11 journalism rules” that further restrict the right to free expression.^{xviii} Around 43 percent of the country’s media outlets have ceased to operate. Since August 2021, 84 percent of female journalists and 52 percent of male journalists have lost their jobs.^{xix} The Taliban has issued bans on some international and national media outlets, alleging that the broadcasts had



breached national press laws. In March 2022, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and German-based Deutsche Welle (DW) broadcasts were banned. In October 2022, the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology suspended two Afghan websites, Hasht-e-Subh and Zawia News.^{xx} In December 2022, FM broadcasts of Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the Voice of America (VOA) were blocked.^{xxi}

Human rights protection

Soon after taking power in August 2021, the Taliban effectively forced all NGOs operating in the country to halt any projects focused on promoting human rights. Nearly all NGO activity shifted to providing emergency humanitarian aid for the millions of Afghans facing food insecurity amid an economic collapse. The Taliban labels human rights a “Western heritage” and commits significant human rights abuses.^{xxii} The halt in NGO activity focused on protecting human rights has meant that Afghanistan is now unsafe for marginalized communities, people with disabilities, victims (especially women and girls), and anyone who speaks up for human rights. As one example, several NGOs running shelters and safe houses for victims of domestic abuse and other human rights abuses have ceased operating. Reports suggest that since 2021, around 32 shelters have been shuttered by the Taliban, and their vehicles, property, and equipment have been confiscated.^{xxiii}

A crisis of solidarity

Amid the harsh crackdown on Afghan civil society, local NGOs have received inadequate support from international donors and nonprofits; in response to the Taliban takeover, many international donors cut off funds and suspended their advocacy and development projects Afghanistan. Local NGO personnel interviewed for this study said that women-led organizations have struggled to receive adequate funding and support from the international community. International NGOs, meanwhile, often have fragmented visions about what it means to support local NGOs, which can lead to a lack of unified support.^{xxiv} The local NGO personnel interviewed for this study expressed the belief that international NGOs and donors could do more to help local organizations.

Financial barriers

A lack of financial resources has contributed to the crippling of Afghan civil society organizations. NGOs rarely receive direct funding from donor countries. Instead, they function as implementing partners for international NGOs and the UN. Many of the Afghan organizations that attempt to receive direct funding through designated funding channels such as the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) and Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) fail to succeed due to onerous due diligence requirements, complicated prerequisites, and difficulty navigating the internal politics of the UN system.^{xxv} One of the reasons NGOs rarely win direct funding grants and contracts is that most international donors need an in-country presence, so they cannot monitor the programs being implemented by NGOs. In addition, they fear that Afghan NGOs are more susceptible to pressure from Taliban authorities. Other reasons relate to institutional capacity shortcomings within the organizations, such as lack of financing, lack of operational policies, poor reporting, financial dependence on the international community and the UN, unfamiliarity with



writing proposals and using preferred donor language, and frequent loss of experienced personnel, who tend to seek employment with international NGOs and UN agencies, which pay higher salaries. Even when Afghan NGOs might succeed in finding direct funding from a donor, the Ministry of Economy might deny approval.

The exclusion of women

Perhaps no group has been worse affected by the Taliban's attack on civil society activity than women. The Ministry of Economics does not approve NGO projects related to gender equality or women's rights.^{xxvi} The authorities have imposed a system of gender apartheid, and civil society organizations focused on women's rights and protection have all but disappeared, meaning women and girls are subject to greater abuse and victimization. In December 2022, the Taliban banned NGOs from employing women. At the time, more than 30 percent of the 55,000 Afghan nationals working for NGOs in the country were barred from working, a loss of capacity that forced many organizations to cancel programs. Others refused to continue operating as a matter of principle. On April 4, 2023, the Taliban issued a decree barring Afghan women from working for the UN. In response, the UN suspended operations for its 3,300 employees in the country. On May 2, following a two-day meeting of special envoys on Afghanistan in Doha, the UN reiterated its commitment to stay in Afghanistan and continue its mission.^{xxvii}

How NGOs Have Withstood the Assault

Some Afghan NGOs have taken extraordinary steps to resist the Taliban's crackdown on civil society. By leaning on their traditional strengths, networks, and knowledge of local context, they have continued making an impact, facilitating online education, providing training for activists and human rights defenders, distributing aid, and delivering healthcare services, among other activities. Even though many of these organizations have been forced to close their offices, their staff have operated secretly.

NGOs have also been an important bridge between the international community and the people of Afghanistan. The Taliban have largely closed Afghanistan off to the world. Local NGOs have engaged with international media and gathered and disseminated data and reports about the situation in the country and emerging issues. They have provided information regarding the humanitarian crisis, food insecurity, state violence, human rights violations, and the closing of the civic space.

Most NGO efforts have been palliative rather than transformative, as organizations have shifted their operations from advocacy and socioeconomic development to humanitarian aid. Some organizations built good relationships with the Taliban to deliver on their humanitarian activities rather than challenge the regime and risk being shut down. Dealing with the regime has, in some cases, raised questions regarding the neutrality and independence of the NGOs and their commitment to human rights.^{xxviii} Similarly, in the face of sudden new restrictions from the Taliban, NGOs, both international and local, have struggled to commit to a long-term agenda that goes beyond emergency humanitarian relief.



Recommendations: How the International Community Can Better Support Afghan Civil Society and NGOs

A thriving and open civic space is crucial for the prosperity and well-being of the Afghan people. The international community and international actors operating in Afghanistan should take the following steps to support civil society in the country.

- **The international community should establish international hubs for NGOs working on and in Afghanistan.** These hubs would be coordination bodies that support and engage with Afghan NGOs to elevate their voices and bring visibility to their work. They would also inform policymakers around the world on issues in Afghanistan ranging from state repression to human rights violations. The hubs would also assist in disseminating information and coordinating efforts with various stakeholders by hosting high-level expert meetings, issuing communique and press releases, launching campaigns, and conducting policy research. By enhancing the profile of NGOs and forming a unified agenda, the hubs could help increase the leverage of Afghan civil society at the local, national, and international levels. A collective Afghan NGO lobby could create more coherence, making it harder for the Taliban authorities and international actors to ignore their demands.
- **Support Afghan NGOs in expanding a strategy of digital resistance.** Since the Taliban have cracked down on the ability to assemble and carry out advocacy in physical space, Afghan civil society needs support to strengthen its presence and activities in digital space. Online platforms can enable activists to organize and exchange information out of sight of Taliban officials. Watchdogs can gather and publish reports of human rights violations and expressions of public opinion to raise awareness and keep attention focused on Taliban repression for audiences both in Afghanistan and abroad. But Afghan NGOs need support to achieve this. Afghanistan has one of the lowest internet penetration rates in the world, with only an estimated 18 percent of the population able to access the internet.^{xxix} Digital literacy is similarly low. International organizations, donors, and the UN should direct more funding and resources toward increasing internet access and supporting civil society activities online. The private sector has an important role, especially large internet service providers and companies like Google or SpaceX, whose Starlink satellites can provide broadband access in remote locations.
- **International donors and organizations should prioritize human rights protection in Afghanistan.** Afghan NGOs and human rights activists are on the frontline of protecting and promoting human rights; they, too, need protection. The international community should think creatively about supporting and protecting activists, aid workers, and NGO staff who are exposed to threats, intimidation, arrests, imprisonment, or worse. This might include establishing safe houses inside Afghanistan under the stewardship of UN agencies where activists, journalists, aid workers, and victims could be assured of their safety and receive direct medical, legal, financial, emotional, and mental health support. Donors might also band together to create a global fund explicitly for protecting Afghan NGOs.



- **The UN and international NGOs should articulate a joint strategy for supporting Afghan civil society.** The international community and the UN should establish a united front and coordinate closely with Afghan NGOs to establish programming priorities and a blueprint for developing and promoting human rights in Afghanistan. The international system for protecting human rights will remain an unachieved mission in Afghanistan if the Taliban continues committing atrocities and depriving Afghans of their fundamental rights.
- **The UN and the international community should broker dialogues between Afghan civil society and the Taliban authorities.** Greater dialogue might seem useless given the Taliban’s intransigence and resistance to negotiating. Still, it is important for Afghan NGOs to be able to raise concerns directly with Taliban authorities in a way that won’t result in reprisals and greater repression. In addition to raising awareness, parties might find that there is room to find creative ways to help support human rights and civil society activity. Islamic NGOs could play an important role with the help of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which could appeal to the Taliban on religious grounds.
- **International donors should increase funding for Afghan human rights NGOs operating in the country.** Most Afghan NGOs are badly underfunded and lack access to donors and pooled funding. International donors and the UN should prioritize raising and disbursing funds to local and national Afghan NGOs, especially at the community level. Since women-led organizations are prone to more vulnerabilities under the current political structure, a dedicated pooled fund would assist them in countering dwindling resources and continuing their operations.
- **The international community should think beyond emergency response and consider long-term strategies for supporting civil society.** Though it is understandable that responding to Afghanistan’s dire humanitarian crisis has been the priority for donors and UN agencies, they should begin to resume strategies and programming to strengthen Afghan civil society over the long term. Supporting Afghan NGOs is a high-leverage intervention. If they are resourced and empowered, they will help ameliorate the human rights situation in the country and support economic activity.
- **The international community should help Afghan NGOs build the capability to carry out and publish investigations and analysis of the reality on the ground.** The more aware populations around the world are of the violence, repression, and human rights violations taking place in Afghanistan, the more likely they are to push their governments to take greater action against the Taliban. National and local NGOs are best placed to monitor and document government atrocities and other human rights violations. International organizations and donors should help strengthen NGOs’ investigative and reporting capabilities and skills. Also, by issuing special and periodic monitoring reports – such as monthly or quarterly “Afghan Civic Space Action Alerts” – NGOs will help equip international actors with a more accurate understanding of the challenges and realities of civil society in Afghanistan, which could prompt greater support and action.



- **The international community should do more to support Afghan women and girls.** Women are the backbone of Afghan civil society. When the Taliban banned NGOs from employing women, tens of thousands of trained, skilled women were put out of work. International NGOs and the UN should find ways to employ these women, such as in remote work situations that don't require public exposure. At the same time, donors and the international community should reclassify programs that deal with gender equality and women's rights that have been banned by the Taliban as components of permitted humanitarian response programming. This would require some watering down of program activities and some subterfuge to avoid Taliban detection, but it would be better than eliminating these programs altogether.^{xxx}



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- ^{vii} Interview with Shahla Farid, Kabul University Lecturer (former), Human Rights Defender, Law Expert (2001-2023), scholar at the Center for Women’s Global Leadership of Rutgers University.
- ^{viii} Interview with Mariam (pseudonym), Human Rights Advocate and Executive Director at an Afghan NGO (2012-2023)
- ^{ix} Interview with Hayat (pseudonym), Human Right Defender, Deputy Director and Program Manager at an Afghan NGOs (2018-2023)
- ^x Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, February, 9, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5284-situation-human-rights-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>.
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