Insecurity in the Physical and Virtual Spheres: Violence, Repression, and Activism in Afghanistan

POLICY BRIEF

Lead Author: Lutf Ali Sultani

Afghanistan Policy Lab
School of Public and International Affairs
Princeton University
June 2023
Introduction

Following the drawdown of foreign forces from Afghanistan in 2014 and the complete takeover by the Taliban in August 2021, the space for activism in Afghanistan has been significantly restricted. Afghanistan underwent a major transition in 2002 with the fall of the previous Taliban regime and the emergence of a democratic system based on a constitution that enshrined civil liberties including the right to protest. However, as security began deteriorating starting in 2014, a rise in the targeting of protest gatherings and killings of journalists and civil activists put a chill on activism. Many activists and civil society actors increasingly turned to social media as an arena for protest and dissent. This trend accelerated after the Taliban regained power in August 2021 and began violently suppressing dissent. Most activism in Afghanistan now occurs not on the streets, but in the virtual spaces of Twitter and other social media platforms – though even those spaces have become perilous, as the Taliban has become more sophisticated at targeting online activists. It is now imperative the international community take greater action to support Afghan civil society online.

This policy brief aims to shed light on the transition of activism in Afghanistan from the physical sphere to the virtual sphere, the various factors that played a role in that shift, and the current state of repression faced by activists. Specifically, the brief focuses on the right to assembly and protest in the country. It draws upon desk research, in-depth interviews with experts in the field, and insights from roundtables and panels hosted by the Afghanistan Policy Lab over the past year to offer solutions for maintaining and strengthening civil society activism in Afghanistan.

Insecurity and the Shift from Physical to Virtual Activism

Article 36 in the Constitution of Afghanistan guarantees the right of Afghan citizens to peacefully assemble and demonstrate, in accordance with the law. In line with this constitutional provision, until 2021 the citizens of Afghanistan were able to take to the streets to protest government decisions. Civil society activists and opposition politicians spoke out against corruption, inefficiency, and waste in the government.

A state of relative security enabled Afghans to exercise these rights. But in 2014, the NATO-led combat mission ended, and foreign militaries handed over complete responsibility for the country’s security to Afghan forces, which were less able to guarantee public safety amid a surge of terrorist and Taliban insurgent activity. In 2015, an especially violent fundamentalist group affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria called ISIS-K emerged in Afghanistan. With a strict Salafist ideology and opposed to even the Taliban, the group began attacking civilians. In November 2015, the group abducted 31 ethnic Hazaras in Zabul province and beheaded 7 of them, including Shokira Tobassom, a 9-year-old girl. The killings sparked a wave of protests led by the Hazaras, who blames the National Unity Government led by President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani for failing to provide security for Afghan citizens.
Seven months after the start of what became known as the Tabassom Movement, another mass protest campaign emerged in response to the National Unity Government’s decision to reroute a 500-kilovolt electricity generation project from Hazara-majority Bamyan province to Salang Parwan province, contravening the master plan of the project’s German developer. Called the Roshanayee (Enlightenment) Movement, tens of thousands of predominantly Hazara protesters took to the streets of Kabul to decry what they viewed as an explicitly discriminatory decision by the government. Then, during the movement’s second mass demonstration held in May 2016, two suicide bombers detonated their explosives in the crowd, killing 80 and injuring more than 300. Another ISIS affiliate called ISIS-KP claimed responsibility.

The attack was unprecedented, the first instance of mass terrorist violence against peaceful protestors in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, it was a precursor of things to come. From 2016 to 2022, ISIS affiliates carried out dozens of deadly attacks on civilians, primarily ethnic and religious minorities. Attacks on Hazaras and Shiites alone claimed more than 1,500 lives.

At the same time, the Taliban carried out an increasing number of suicide attacks in cities. In May 2017, the group detonated a tanker carrying explosives in Kabul's Green Zone, a heavily fortified diplomatic area a few hundred meters from the Presidential Palace. It was the deadliest explosion the group had carried out since reappearing in the country, killing approximately 100 people and injuring nearly 500 more. Similar to the Tobassom Movement two years earlier, the attack sparked a movement called the "Uprising for Change" that demanded government leaders, including the president, resign for failing to guarantee the security of the population.

This time, however, a protest turned violent, and Afghan government security forces shot dead 10 demonstrators, including the son of a member of the Afghan Senate. Adding to the misery, a suicide bomber carried out an attack at the man’s funeral, killing 6 and injuring 87 others, including high-ranking officials of the National Unity Government, such as Abdullah Abdullah, the former Chief Executive Officer of the unity government.

This spate of violence effectively spelled the end of civil protests and the right to freely assemble in Afghanistan. The Cabinet Laws Committee of the National Unity Government, using "preserving national and Islamic values" as a pretext, placed severe limitations on the right to protest, restricting the subject matter, duration, and location of protests and who was allowed to participate in them. The police could now forbid gatherings, strikes, and demonstrations without explanation and even if the organizers had a permit. The government argued that the restrictions would reduce the risk to the protesters' lives, but activists said the government was violating the constitution and denying them of their rights.

With the suppression of civil protests and an uptick in targeted assassinations of journalists and political and human rights activists by Taliban insurgents, activists had to seek safe, feasible means of organizing and expressing themselves. They increasingly turned to social media. Protests moved from the streets to social media platforms, particularly Twitter, and virtual collective protests, known as "Twitter storms," became more and more common. The first Twitter storm occurred after a bombing at a protest rally organized by the Enlightenment Movement in Kabul. More and more Afghans took their activism online by creating Twitter accounts, and the platform became
the primary arena for expressions of dissent. Hashtags that originated in Afghanistan went viral. For instance, in early 2021, the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide, which condemned deadly attacks on Hazara populations, was tweeted out more than 100,000 times in a few days.\textsuperscript{xvi}

### The Taliban Crackdown in the Physical and Virtual Worlds

Since regaining control of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban has severely restricted civil liberties far beyond the limitations imposed by the National Unity Government. It has also curtailed women's rights, including the right to work, study, carry out leisure activities, and travel.\textsuperscript{xvii} It has even banned women from working for the UN. A state of gender apartheid now prevails in the country.\textsuperscript{xviii}

Though many Afghans have suffered under the Taliban, women were the first and most vocal group to protest against the Taliban policies, carrying out dozens of protests since the Taliban regained power. The Taliban responded with repression, torture, and even murder.\textsuperscript{xix} The authorities have decreed that all protests and slogans must be pre-approved by them.\textsuperscript{xx} The crackdown has created an atmosphere of fear and terror in the city, discouraging people from taking to the streets and prompting many women and human rights defenders to flee the country to neighboring countries, where they have faced economic deprivation and insecurity.

Despite the risk, some women in Afghanistan have continued to protest against the Taliban by taking their activism online. They have gathered in private residences and filmed videos shared on social media of them holding up placards or chanting slogans against the Taliban.\textsuperscript{xxi} In one video that was widely shared, two women sit together, their faces covered in veils, singing in trembling voices about the oppression of women by the ruling regime.\textsuperscript{xxii}

But the Taliban has also cracked down on such social media activism. Taliban authorities closely monitor the online activities of citizens and punish those who express dissenting opinions on social media platforms with arrest and torture. For instance, in February 2022, the Taliban’s intelligence agency detained two men on charges of spreading propaganda on Facebook.\textsuperscript{xxiii} In March 2022, Khaled Qaderi, a local journalist, was sentenced to one year in prison by a court in Herat for expressing critical opinions against the Taliban on social media.\textsuperscript{xxiv} Engaging in social media activity in Afghanistan has become synonymous with the risk of imprisonment and torture.

The Taliban also use social media, particularly Twitter, to spread propaganda and threaten critics. The group has been active online for years, but with it now in control of the entire government apparatus, its capability and reach have increased.\textsuperscript{xxv} Some Taliban accounts are even verified with a blue checkmark.\textsuperscript{xxvi} These accounts openly threaten opponents, even those who reside outside of Afghanistan. For instance, Saeed Khosti, a former spokesperson for the Taliban Ministry of Interior who has nearly 300,000 followers on Twitter, once tweeted: "We have hundreds of fighters in Europe and America. They only need to act cohesively. We ask them to kill all the fugitives who advertise against their homeland with a knife."\textsuperscript{xxvii}
Aside from the exceptionally brave, most online activism against the Taliban is now carried out by members of the Afghan diaspora. These individuals are tens of thousands of former government officials, civil society activists, and educated Afghans who have sought refuge in various countries around the world after the collapse of the previous government.

Not long after the Taliban takeover, Hazara members of the Afghan diaspora revived the #StopHazaraGenocide hashtag to condemn an attack on a Hazara education center that left 53 dead and more than 100 injured. The campaign went viral globally; the hashtag was tweeted more than 11 million times, including by the writers Paulo Coelho and Elif Shafak and Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai. Street protests were held in nearly 100 countries, and the topic of violence against the Hazaras was discussed in the parliaments of Great Britain, Australia, and Canada.

**Recommendations: How the International Community Can Support Afghan Activists**

With both physical and virtual spaces for activism all but completely closed, save for the few acts of internal dissent and the online activity of the Afghan diaspora outside of the country, Afghan activists, especially those still inside Afghanistan, need help from the international community. There are steps multinational companies, foreign governments, and global netizens can take.

Opponents of the Taliban outside Afghanistan should support and amplify activist campaigns against the Taliban. The global campaign to condemn the killing of Hazaras was a powerful example of how a collective movement on social media could generate global solidarity and influence the agendas of institutions, such as parliaments, toward Afghanistan. The international community should take the demands of Afghan activists seriously and help amplify them.

Twitter should immediately and permanently remove the blue checkmark verification badge from accounts that promote the Taliban's policies and values. Prior to Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, obtaining a blue checkmark verification badge was difficult. This designation was awarded to politicians, celebrities, journalists, and other public figures whose identities could be verified. However, Musk recently changed the policy, allowing anyone to purchase a badge for a monthly fee. As a result, many fake and unverified accounts now have the badge. Among these are several accounts that regularly tweet support for Taliban policies and that belong to mid-level officials of the Taliban's de facto government. This confers a level of credibility, legitimacy, and influence in the online sphere to sanctioned individuals who promote violence and misogyny.

Furthermore, Twitter should block accounts that threaten civil activists outside of Afghanistan with violence and death. As a global platform, Twitter has a responsibility to uphold human rights and prevent the spread of extremist ideologies that threaten the safety of individuals and communities.

Western countries should take in exiled Afghan activists and provide safe houses for those still in Afghanistan. International organizations and aid organizations should attempt to provide
safe houses for activists who are in Afghanistan facing detention or worse from the Taliban regime. Furthermore, many activists have been forced to flee to neighboring countries, particularly Iran and Pakistan, where they often face dire economic, physical, and psychological hardship. The international community should provide greater support and help to activists who are in exile or who are trying to leave Afghanistan to seek asylum in safe host countries, such as the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia. These nations should commit to accepting more Afghan activists, women especially, and expedite their visa processes. International donors should increase funding to help provide for the safe harbor of Afghan activists.

**International NGOs and media companies should help combat misinformation related to Afghanistan.** Given that social media has become the primary means for activism in Afghanistan, efforts to combat disinformation and fake news are critical. Global activist campaigns against the Taliban depend on accurate information about what is going on in the country. Some organizations are trying to promote accuracy in the online information environment, but more needs to be done. Local and international media watchdogs need more funding and support.


Noorin, Afghan female university student, Interview with the author, March 2023

Shabnam Nasimi, Twitter, December 2022, https://twitter.com/NasimiShabnam/status/1606774205340684289?s=20


Ten verified Twitter accounts of Taliban’s officials and supporters on Twitter: Aman Afghan; Umar Jalal; Ahsanullah Ahrar, Deputy Director at the Office of DP Minister for the Economic Affairs; Noman Ghaznavi; Sayed Jamal Agha; Qari Mohammad Qasim; Ahmad Wali Haqmal, Spokesperson of MoF; Baryal kunduzai; Sultan, Cowherd prisoner(زننای گاوچران)


“Death toll in last week’s Kabul school blast climbs to 52,” AP, October 2022, https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-afghanistan-religion-taliban-suicide-bombings-5a50c846bbabf6f2bfa5e64d72d67c0

“#STOPHAZARAGENOCIDE CAMPAIGN,” Bamyan Foundation, October 2022, https://bamyanfoundation.org/stophazaragenocide-campaign

Matt Williams, ”The Importance of Twitter Verification and Elon Musk’s Threat to Legacy Blue Ticks,” LinkedIn, April 2023, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/importance-twitter-verification-elon-musk-s-threat-legacy-matt-/