



SAFETY AND RISK MITIGATION ORGANIZATION

State of Civic Space in Afghanistan, Two Years Under the Taliban

This brief report aims to provide an overview of the overall human rights situation in Afghanistan, with a focus on the civic space, as well as a summary of the situation of HRDs, CSOs, and journalists in Afghanistan from the time the Taliban came to power until today. The report is based on information and cases collected as part of ongoing human rights monitoring by the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO), as well as several other reliable and verified sources. SRMO maintains a database of incidents and rights violations involving human rights defenders, civil society in general, and Afghan civilians. Cases are only included in the SRMO database if they have been verified by SRMO networks.

Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the civic space of the country has been increasingly curtailed; organizations like CIVICUS describe that the state of civic space in Afghanistan has become “closed”, the worst rating in terms of civic freedoms.¹ The de -facto authorities have decimated freedom of expression, association, and assembly through a series of strict restrictions on civil society. Activists, especially WHRDs, face harassment, surveillance, arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention, torture, enforced disappearances, threats, violence, and even death.² Afghan NGOs have lost financial and material support from donors, and following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, were subject to raids. NGOs have also been limited in their work, and have had their bank accounts frozen by the Taliban.³ All these restrictive measures have forced some CSOs into closing or into hiding. In this context, the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization has closely monitored the situation of the civic space in Afghanistan.

For two decades, the Afghan civil society advanced human rights, public sector transparency and democratic changes to government.⁴ However, in 2021, the year in which the Taliban retook power, all the progress made by civil society was completely decimated, as the Taliban closed any space for dissent. Alone in 2021, the SRMO logged a total of 37 deaths of activists and media workers in targeted attacks, 89 incidents overall. Between January and mid-August of that year, the SRMO documented 21 cases of violence against CSAs and their family members, including the targeted killings of two WHRDs, 10 targeted killings of media workers, and 11 killings of CSAs and 3 family members. The majority of these attacks took place in Kabul and Nangarhar and went unclaimed by the Taliban. From August 2021 to December 2021, the SRMO documented 11 targeted killings of HRDs, CSAs and media workers, including

¹ <https://monitor.civicus.org/country-rating-changes/afghanistan/>

² *ibid*

³ https://spia.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2023-05/Civic%20Space%20Policy%20Brief_FINAL.pdf

⁴ *ibid*

4 WHRDs. Many more were injured in beatings. Additionally, the SRMO database recorded 12 detentions of civil society and media workers, often carried out through beatings while covering demonstrations.

The patterns of violence and abuse against civil society continued at an alarming pace in 2022. During this year, the SRMO logged a total of 274 incidents of abuses against HRDs, WHRDs, CSAs, protesters, university lecturers, media workers and NGOs. The abuses in 2022 include 232 detentions, 18 targeted killings, 16 cases of harassments and beating and 8 victims of sexual assault. The cases of arbitrary detention lacked transparency and due process, and often the detainees didn't have access to their most fundamental human rights or were subjected to torture. WHRDs who were detained were also subjected to gender violence, such as sexual violence or threats of forced marriage. There are claims that women protesters and WHRDs who were detained experienced torture, psychological coercion, and intimidation.

The Taliban divisions that conducted these detentions were never held accountable. The Taliban also clamped down on dissent and civic space through night raids targeting WHRDs, arrests of Taliban critiques, threats and detentions of activists' families, and raids on HRDs' safe houses. Harassment and intimidation to CSAs provoked the halting of their functions, as many HRDs and WHRDs stopped their worked after they were released from detention. The Taliban also curtailed CSOs' activities by creating a general environment of fear and intimidation; women directors from NGOs were forcefully removed for not complying with hijab requirements. Women protesting the Taliban restrictions on women's rights had their passports and IDs confiscated and were often subject to violence and arbitrary arrests. Women protests were also violently disrupted using violence, whips, intimidation, and detentions against media personnel, demonstrators, and bystanders. This year was marked by the shrinkage and dissipation of civil society, as it became too dangerous for WHRDs, HRDs, CSAs and media workers to operate freely. Nevertheless, Afghan society, especially women activists continued to protest against women's restrictions. In 2022, the systematic violence against civil society and the dismantling of the protection mechanisms forced journalists, HRDs, WHRDs and CSAs into hiding or out of the country. In this way, HRDs were particularly vulnerable during this year.

In 2023, the Taliban has continued targeting members of civil society with systematic human rights abuses. Until June of this year, the SRMO has logged a total of 70 reported abuses against civil society and their relatives, including 7 targeted killings, 53 detentions, 2 cases of kidnapping, and 10 cases of harassment / beatings of CSAs, WHRDs, writers, university lecturers, media workers, and NGO staff. Individuals expressing their concerns on social media are also targeted, facing detentions and other abuses. Even though during the beginning of the year international stakeholders attempted to overturn the Taliban's December 2022 ban on women working for NGOs and attending universities, women continued to be prohibited from attending secondary and tertiary education and from exercising humanitarian work. In the beginning of April, the Taliban announced a ban on women's employment with UN agencies, situation that has yet to be reversed. Many CSAs have had to evacuate the country, and the Taliban continue to obstruct freedom of expression, assembly and association, even overseas.

According to another survey conducted between May and June 2022 by the Afghanistan Human Rights Coordination Mechanism (AHRCM), of 663 Afghan HRDs inside and outside Afghanistan, "Some 90% of in-country HRDs and WHRDs have reported experiencing multiple risks and threats such as: kidnapping and imprisonment; physical and psychological harm; defamation; house searches; arbitrary arrest and torture, threats of intimidation and harassment; and violence against activists or family members by the Taliban, including murder."⁵ According to the report, HRDs who have managed to flee the country and are mainly in neighboring countries are also not safe, as they face various risks and lack protection mechanisms.

⁵ <https://www.ahrcm-srmo.org/resources>

As the survey results show, “out-of-country HRDs and WHRDs reported psychological harm (45.4%), harassment from local authorities and the threat of deportation (33.7%), and financial problems for surviving family members (9.9%).”⁶ This clearly shows the vulnerability of Afghan HRDs inside and outside Afghanistan, and the challenges and threats faced not only by themselves but also by their families today.

According to a survey by Reporters Without Borders and the Afghan Independent Journalists Association, "since the Taliban takeover, 40% of Afghan media have closed, [and] 80% of women journalists have lost their jobs."⁷ This shows that the civic and atomic atmosphere for activists and journalists is severely restricted.

Recommendations for the International Community

The civic space in Afghanistan has suffered a steep erosion, creating an environment that makes it unfeasible for people to exercise their most basic human and civil rights. CSAs, especially women, continue to protest the Taliban’s restrictions, but face increasing threats to their well-being. Civic space in Afghanistan must prosper in order to guarantee the human rights of the Afghan people. In this respect, the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization has generated a series of recommendations for the International Community to continue supporting Afghan CSAs and NGOs.

The International Donor Community should:

- Issue emergency humanitarian visas for HRDs, WHRDs, and CSAs including journalists that are at risk because of their human rights or media work.
- The International community should publicly condemn all forms of restrictions and human rights violations committed by the defacto authorities and call for immediate stop on arbitrarily arrest and unlawful detention against Afghan civilians including violations against HRDs, WHRDs and CSOs.
- Allocate adequate financial resources to Afghan NGOs who work to protect HRDs, WHRDs and CSAs at risk.

The United Nations:

- Should advocate for the reinsertion of Afghan women in local and international NGOs and find initiatives to support women led NGOs and other entities.
- The Human Rights Council members must recognize Gender Apartheid as a crime and support Afghan women in the pursue of justice in international justice mechanisms such as International Criminal Court (ICC).
- The International community and UN should document human rights violations and abuses against Afghan civilians by all parties and support local WHRDS, HRDs and CSAs in such documentation which could be used in the court of justice.

⁶ ibid

⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/taliban-takeover-40-afghan-media-have-closed-80-women-journalists-have-lost-their-jobs>

The information used in this report comes from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source is [The Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization](#) database, whilst the secondary sources come from journals, Think Tanks, and other NGOs.