

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1268
Land:	Afghanistan
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Afghanistan: Taliban Severely Restrict Media, Journalists Arbitrarily Detained, Beaten
Udgivet:	1. oktober 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	8. december 2021



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October 1, 2021 12:00AM EDT

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Afghanistan: Taliban Severely Restrict Media

Journalists Arbitrarily Detained, Beaten



A member of Taliban special forces pushes a journalist covering a demonstration by women protesters outside a school in Kabul, Afghanistan, September 30, 2021. © 2021 Bulent Kilic/AFP via Getty Images

(New York) – Taliban authorities in [Afghanistan](#) have imposed wide-ranging restrictions on media and free speech that are already stifling criticism and dissent, Human Rights Watch said today.

During a late September meeting with journalists in Kabul, the Taliban Ministry of Information and Culture distributed media regulations whose provisions are so broad and vague as to prohibit virtually any critical reporting about the Taliban.

“Despite the Taliban’s [promises](#) to allow media that ‘respected Islamic values’ to function, the new rules are suffocating media freedom in the country,” said [Patricia Gossman](#), associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The Taliban regulations are so sweeping that journalists are self-censoring and fear ending up in prison.”

A copy of the regulations seen by Human Rights Watch says that media are prohibited from printing or broadcasting reports that “are contrary to Islam,” “insult national figures,” or “distort news content.” Journalists are required to “ensure that their reporting is balanced” and not report on “matters that have not been confirmed by officials” or issues that “could have a negative impact on the public’s attitude.” Media outlets are required to “prepare detailed reports” with the new governmental regulatory body before publication.

Taliban security forces have also arbitrarily [detained journalists](#) and beaten several. The head of a journalists’ advocacy group told Human Rights Watch that the Taliban have taken at least 32 journalists into custody since they took power in Kabul on August 15. Most were released after warnings about their reporting, but some were beaten. One who was badly beaten was released with the warning not to tell anyone what happened to him. As of October 1, at least one remained in custody without access to his family.

[In the city of Herat on September 6, the Taliban detained Murtaza Samadi](#), 21, a freelance photojournalist, while he was covering a protest. Family members said that after hearing of his arrest, they asked officials at the governor’s office and police station where he had been taken. They were told that the case had been referred to the intelligence department and that Samadi was accused of organizing the protest and having “connections with foreigners.” He remained in custody without access to his family until he was released on September 30.

Beyond the arrests, the Taliban’s intelligence office has summoned journalists and warned them that their reporting constituted “propaganda” and needed to stop.

An editor of a media outlet led by women said that, after the Taliban takeover, they had continued to publish online but stopped after the new regulations were announced. “We have lost the space for free media with the Taliban taking over the country,” she said. “We do not have free media in Afghanistan anymore.”

A journalist in Kabul said that the regulations were “very worrying,” as they would “restrict most of the media’s activities. Those who are still operating no longer publish anything critical. They mostly interview Taliban officials. Previously, they were active in criticizing the government ... but with these regulations, censorship is the immediate result.”

A Kabul-based editor said that the prohibition on “insulting national figures” could be interpreted very broadly and curtail any reporting on corruption or other abuses.

Many Afghan journalists have fled the country or have gone into hiding, and scores of media outlets, especially outside major cities, have closed altogether. Taliban commanders and fighters have long engaged in a [pattern of threats](#), intimidation, and violence against members of the media, and have been responsible for targeted killings of journalists.

[International human rights law](#) protects the right to freedom of expression, including freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds. Any measures to restrict freedom of speech or media freedom must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. Criticism of public figures that is deemed insulting is an insufficient basis to justify imposing penalties.

“The Taliban are making it very clear they don’t want to face public scrutiny,” Gossman said. “Foreign governments should send the message that the Taliban’s treatment of the media will remain a core concern of future relations.”

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