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# Afghanistan: Taliban Trample Media Freedom

Journalists Face Arrest, Torture; Journalists in Exile at Risk of Forced Return



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*Officials and Journalists attend a Taliban press conference at the Government Media and Information Center in Kabul, Afghanistan, October 12, 2025. © 2025 Siddiqullah Alizai/AP Photo*

- The Taliban have gutted Afghan media since taking control of the country in August 2021 through the use of surveillance and censorship and by punishing media workers for perceived criticism.
- As the Taliban’s oppression of the media has increased, the need for independent news outlets in Afghanistan has become even greater. Journalists described both the harsh conditions in Afghanistan and growing challenges facing those living in exile.
- The Taliban should end the arbitrary detention, torture, and other ill-treatment of journalists, discriminatory restrictions on women journalists, and censorship. Countries with Afghan journalists in exile should end their forced return to Afghanistan.

(New York) – The Taliban have gutted [Afghanistan](#)’s media since taking control of the country in August 2021, Human Rights Watch said today. They have subjected the remaining news outlets to surveillance and censorship, and punished journalists and other media workers for any perceived criticism. Afghan journalists in exile who fled Taliban persecution now face increasing threats of forced return to Afghanistan, where they fear retaliation.

Media freedom has declined throughout Afghanistan over the past four years under Taliban rule. News outlets report that the Taliban’s intelligence agency monitors all content and the “morality police” ensure adherence by staff to prescribed dress codes and other regulations. Local officials enforce official rules arbitrarily, leading to varying degrees of censorship across provinces. The Taliban’s severe restrictions on women have caused a sharp decline in the number of female journalists in the country.

“Taliban officials increasingly compel Afghan journalists to produce ‘safe,’ pre-approved stories, and they punish those who step out of line with arbitrary detention and torture,” said [Fereshta Abbasi](#), Afghanistan researcher at Human Rights Watch. “While all Afghan journalists have been affected and many have fled the country, women journalists have been among the hardest hit.”

Human Rights Watch conducted 18 remote interviews with Afghan journalists in Afghanistan and 13 in-person interviews with Afghan journalists living in Türkiye as well as with Afghan refugee organizations. These interviews were conducted primarily in August 2025. Journalists described both the harsh conditions in Afghanistan and growing challenges facing those living in exile in European Union countries, Türkiye, and the United States.

Reporters whom the Taliban accuse of working with media in exile or having contacts with opposition groups face detention, severe beatings, and death threats. One journalist who had been detained said that Taliban officials told him: “We can kill you, and no one can even ask us why.”

The Taliban’s Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV) regularly inspects media offices. Officials have detained media workers for violating the ministry’s law on the separation of workspaces for men and women, prohibitions on broadcasting women’s voices, and playing music on television and radio.

Shortly after August 2021, the Taliban Media and Information Center announced “11 rules” for media, which include prohibitions on broadcasting or publishing anything that is “contrary to Islam,” “insults national figures,” or “violates privacy.” Journalists are required to ensure “balanced” reporting and “only publish the truth,” but the rules provide no criteria for interpreting the terms. The open-ended wording allows for arbitrary interventions by officials at all levels.

Taliban authorities review reports prior to publication, censoring anything they decide has “[a negative impact](#) on the public’s attitude or ... morale.” “They tell us: ‘Make sure you don’t harm us with your reports,’” a journalist said. “If you do, you’ll be in trouble.”

The Taliban have curtailed women’s representation in the media, instructing the media not to air soap operas and dramas featuring women. They have required women employed in the media to wear hijabs.

Under the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice enacted in August 2024, inspectors [check to ensure](#) that media content complies with Sharia (Islamic law) and does not contain images of living beings.

Because of the restrictions, journalists routinely self-censor and may limit their reporting to official events, such as award ceremonies, diplomatic visits, and development projects. Failure to report on official events can lead to reprimands, threats, and in some cases, detention. A Kabul-based journalist said he had been detained twice for not reporting on such events.

Another journalist said that the spokesperson for the provincial authorities called to tell him to attend the police graduation day. “I didn’t go because it wasn’t newsworthy,” he said. “The next day, they told me: ‘You aren’t allowed to report anymore.’”

Media workers who fled Afghanistan to other countries have been living precarious lives in exile in fear of being forcibly returned to Afghanistan and facing persecution.

Countries hosting Afghan refugees should maintain the position that Afghanistan is unsafe for returns and ensure respect at all times for the principle of nonrefoulement, the prohibition on returning people to situations of danger. The human rights situation in Afghanistan has continued to deteriorate since the Taliban takeover.

“The Taliban’s oppression of the media has increased as the need for independent news outlets in Afghanistan becomes ever greater,” Abbasi said. “The US, UK, Germany, and other governments

that promised to resettle Afghans should extend their support to Afghan journalists at risk and cease all deportations to Afghanistan.”

## **Afghanistan’s Vastly Diminished Media Landscape**

Before August 2021, Afghanistan had hundreds of private and independent media outlets, including television, radio, and online news sources, most supported by foreign assistance, which played an active role in public life. While journalists **faced violence** from government officials and warlord-backed militias, as well as from the Taliban, they largely operated openly and published diverse content that was at times critical of the authorities and the government.

Since retaking power, Taliban authorities have imposed severe restrictions on many aspects of Afghan society. Repression of the media appears designed to control access to information and stifle criticism. Many journalists have also fled the country. Reporters Without Borders reported that within the first few months of Taliban rule, **40 to 60 percent** of Afghan news outlets stopped operating. The number of men working in media declined from roughly 4,000 to about 2,000 in 2022. For women, the numbers dropped from **up to 1400** before 2021 to 600 in 2024. Taliban policies and foreign funding cuts have forced many outlets to reduce staff or close altogether.

## **Torture, Mistreatment and Unfair Trials of Journalists, Media Workers**

The General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) and the Ministry of Virtue and Vice are the main entities responsible for inspecting media outlets and apprehending media workers who do not abide by the Taliban’s standards.

Prominent reasons for intelligence detention include accusations of spying, being in contact with opposition groups and international or exiled media, and reporting on the Islamic State of Khorasan Province opposition armed group or internal disputes within the Taliban leadership. Both the Ministry of Virtue and Vice and the intelligence agency raid media offices and journalists’ homes, during which they may confiscate phones and computers and access journalists’ contacts. Journalists said that the agency has arrested people for speaking to the media.

Contact with Afghan media in exile is particularly dangerous because the Taliban view these journalists as linked to the opposition and a threat to their control. A Herat-based journalist said that when outside media publish a critical report, the authorities investigate journalists inside Afghanistan: “They suspect us of sending those reports.” The intelligence agency has detained journalists working for Afghan media outlets based outside the country. A colleague of two people who were detained said that “GDI checked their phones and found out that they were working with exiled media. After release, they no longer work in media at all.”

Reporting that is critical of the authorities can lead to accusations of spying. One journalist said:

“In 2023, I was accused, along with [two other journalists] of spying and speaking against the Emirate [the Taliban]. We had to sign a letter that we would never do so again. Two weeks later they called us back and took us directly to prison.... [A senior intelligence official] tortured me. He put plastic on my head so I couldn’t breathe. He slapped my face.... My hands and feet were tied. I was choked many times.... I was tortured for more than an hour every night. They called us “American kids” and accused us of working with exiled media.”

The Taliban commonly committed torture by slapping and punching victims, with some journalists saying they were hit so hard they suffered broken teeth and facial bones. Some journalists reported being lashed on the back. Their release sometimes depended on signing a statement that they would not work as journalists again. “Those released have had ongoing mental health concerns,” one journalist said.

Being a journalist from an ethnic minority, particularly the Hazara—who were frequent targets of Taliban attacks during the armed conflict—can result in worse treatment. One Hazara journalist said that while he was in custody, intelligence personnel taunted him saying, “A Hazara kid dared to

“speak against us? We won the war with the Americans, who do you think you are? You are nothing to us! We can kill you whenever we want.”

Hazara journalists may face additional restrictions, with intelligence agents more active in Hazara areas. “They accuse Hazara journalists of being the Taliban’s enemy,” said a journalist from Kabul. Another Kabul journalist said that an intelligence official told him: “If you were speaking Pashto [the language of the Pashtun community], your crimes would have been less.”

In some cases, Taliban courts have put journalists on trial. Even those acquitted for insufficient evidence may still face torture and mistreatment. A Hazara journalist tried for propaganda and spying for foreign organizations said: “I didn’t have a defense lawyer. No one dares to become a defense lawyer for a journalist. I was convicted of propaganda against the Taliban and threatened that even if I was acquitted, I could be killed.”

A journalist who posted a video of Taliban security forces destroying a landmark statue was severely beaten in custody, leaving him with a badly bruised face and swollen hands. His father was allowed to visit him only after the journalist spent four months in detention. He was sentenced to one year but released after six months.

A journalist in western Afghanistan was prosecuted on charges of propaganda and having contacts with foreign media in late 2024. Although he was ultimately acquitted, the judge asked him why he had reported on topics that were against Taliban media policy.

Journalists cannot report on detentions or court proceedings. Several said that while they are aware of incidents of torture and extrajudicial killings, as well as crimes like murder and domestic violence, they cannot report on them.

Reporting on disagreements within the Taliban is also prohibited. While some media [have reported](#) critical views of the Taliban’s ban on girls’ and women’s secondary and higher education in a general way, they cannot discuss divisions within the Taliban on the subject. In January 2025, after the Taliban’s former deputy foreign minister, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, [publicly called](#) for senior Taliban leaders to end the ban and then abruptly left the country, journalists said they received a letter from Taliban officials announcing a prohibition on asking questions about the policy on women’s education.

A journalist based in Kabul said he was reprimanded for interviewing a religious figure who said that the government should open girls’ secondary schools, contrary to official policy. Taliban authorities use threats of detention to shut down reporting on prohibited taboo subjects.

Journalists outside Kabul face threats if they report on issues outside their province. A journalist in a central province said he and his colleagues were detained after an official accused them of citing the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and being paid from outside Afghanistan: “They told me, ‘This is [name of province]—you should report only from [here].’”

Journalists have also been the victims of enforced disappearances in which the authorities refuse to acknowledge or reveal a detained person’s situation or whereabouts. A journalist in western Afghanistan who was detained for almost a month in 2024 for writing about the ban on girls’ secondary education said his family was unaware of where he was detained for the first week, during which he was slapped and humiliated.

Other journalists also reported that their families were not informed where they were held until days after their arrest, and not allowed to visit them in intelligence agency custody.

### **Harsh Restrictions on Women Working in Media**

In urban areas such as Kabul and Herat, a few women are news anchors, though limited to major outlets like [Tolo News](#). In some provinces, no women are working in media at all, while in others,

women journalists must abide by onerous Taliban restrictions and often cannot work from offices, but only from home.

Particularly outside urban areas, women journalists report having to travel with a male guardian while working. Harsh restrictions on where they can go and to whom they can speak has made the job extremely difficult. An editor in western Herat said that while his office has female staff, they cannot speak with Taliban officials or interview people in the street.

Media outlets have reported frequent visits by [Virtue and Vice Ministry personnel](#) to monitor compliance with the law, particularly the required segregated workspaces for women and men and to ensure that women are wearing the hijab. Officials who determine that media staff [have violated](#) these requirements may issue a warning or detain them.

Male journalists also reported varying restrictions on interviewing women. “In Bamiyan we can speak with women for our reports,” one journalist said. “In Badakhshan we can speak to women but not related to human rights issues. If a woman has opened a new business, we can speak with her. This is not allowed in Takhar and Faryab.”

Another said: “I tried to speak with two female doctors. Neither of them wanted to speak with me. They are scared of PVPV because they could be detained.”

Women journalists are frequently blocked from covering even official events. “There was an opening ceremony at the Public Health Directorate, and they stopped me at the gate and told me that women aren’t allowed,” a female journalist said. “That was the last time I tried to produce a report for local media.”

Under the Virtue and Vice Law, women’s voices are considered private and should be concealed. On October 26, 2024, the Virtue and Vice Ministry announced that women should not recite the Quran or sing in public. Radio stations in some provinces have stopped broadcasting women’s voices as a result. Even where women’s voices are not officially banned, women are afraid to speak: “Women’s voices are not banned in Badghis yet, but PVPV is warning every day,” a woman journalist in western Afghanistan said.

Journalists at some media outlets said they have tried to expand their programming on women’s health, including mental health, and educational programs for girls beyond sixth grade, because the ongoing ban has increased the need for such programs.

### **Varying and Arbitrary Enforcement of Regulations**

Most journalists interviewed said that Ministry of Virtue and Vice officials have told them not to take videos of people, which the ministry views as prohibited under Islamic law. The only videos allowed in most cases are produced by the state-run broadcaster, Radio-Television Afghanistan, and sent to media outlets. In some provinces, the authorities ban photos altogether. A journalist in a western province said that following an official cultural event, the authorities allowed only a picture of an empty room to be published. The authorities use WhatsApp groups to relay news and send pictures and recordings that officials prepare after events.

Journalists are also required to use or avoid certain terms, such as “Emirate” but not Taliban, and to report most content in Pashto. There are virtually no media in minority languages like Uzbek. The Sunni Muslim authorities have also banned programs on Shia religious teachings. A journalist who was preparing a report on a Shia religious leader asked the authorities for a comment. He said he received threatening messages saying that if he published the article, he “would die under torture.”

All the journalists interviewed said there was a lack of clarity about media policy and arbitrary enforcement of regulations. Local authorities have considerable autonomy to interpret policies in their provinces and implement restrictions accordingly. A journalist in western Afghanistan said: “The Taliban are not unified; each of them determines how they want to deal with the media. Rules

differ from one province to another. If you go to GDI and say that the director of culture allowed you to work on this report, they say they don't care."

A journalist working in southern Afghanistan said, "Sometimes we don't really know what's allowed and what isn't. For example, GDI allows pictures, but the Department of Culture doesn't." There are also regional variations: journalists said Kandahar has more restrictions than other provinces because the Taliban leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, is based there.

The need to get permission for a report depends on the inclinations of regional authorities. A journalist based in eastern Afghanistan said that even reporting on the sport of cricket caused him problems with the local culture department: "I went to Kunar with the Afghanistan cricket team captain and reported on that. The authorities accused me of not getting permission and banned me from working. I had to sign a guarantee letter to be able to resume working."

The authorities typically require prior permission for travel to some provinces and districts, including Panjshir, where opposition armed groups have attacked Taliban forces. "Journalists can go to Panjshir, but you will be followed," said one journalist. "You need to coordinate with local authorities beforehand. If you don't get permission, you can't report."

Reporting from the Iranian border also requires advance approval, and local officials try to control the content: "A few weeks ago, I went to the Iran border to cover the situation of Afghans who are being deported. We wanted to speak with Afghans about the deportations, but Taliban officials said, 'Ask positive questions, don't take pictures, and don't record videos of women.'"

Officials routinely demand "positive" reporting and shut down content perceived as negative. A journalist who attempted to report on a spike in gas prices during the hostilities between Israel and Iran said, "They said it's negative news, and you aren't allowed to cover it." He added, "If people use the word 'complain,' I replace it... so as not to get in trouble."

We can't report on people's problems and complaints," he said. "They consider it propaganda against the regime...and [label] critical reporting as "destroying the system."

## **Afghan Media in Exile**

More than [1,000 Afghan journalists](#) reportedly fled Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Some were evacuated to the US, Canada, and various countries in Europe. Others who had no sponsoring countries went to Türkiye and Pakistan. Many operating in exile are under financial strain due to cuts in foreign assistance.

Journalists who fled Afghanistan after criticizing the Taliban or criticized them while in exile fear retaliation.

Türkiye rarely grants Afghans the Turkish version of international protection leading to conditional refugee status and instead deports large numbers of them. Afghans in Türkiye without residency permits and those who have been unable to apply for international protection live a precarious existence, avoiding the authorities and lacking access to services like health care and education.

They cannot easily travel inside the country because they risk being picked up by police and immigration authorities and transferred to a deportation center. Internal travel is limited for those who are registered as applicants for international protection. "I am not allowed to travel without a permit...or risk deportation if caught," a journalist who has lived in Istanbul said.

Since [February 2025](#), the Afghan embassy in Ankara and consulate in Istanbul, which had been staffed by officials from the former Afghan government, have come under Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This unusual arrangement has allowed Taliban consular officials access, adding to fears among Afghans in Türkiye that they are being watched. "Many of us have family members in Afghanistan, and don't want to put their safety at risk," one journalist said.

Journalists working for Afghan media in exile said the Taliban were aware of their presence in Türkiye. One said that when she renewed her Afghan passport, the consular authorities accused her of biased reporting. Another said he had received a call from a Taliban official warning him to stop reporting.

As part of its campaign to expel Afghan refugees, Pakistan **stopped issuing** and renewing visas for Afghans in late 2023. As of mid-2025, over 150 Afghan journalists in Pakistan were believed to be at risk of refoulement.

In the US, **most major media outlets** evacuated their employees in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover, and these journalists received Temporary Protected Status (TPS) until they could obtain asylum. However, the expiration of TPS in mid-2025 under the Donald Trump administration has left Afghans with pending asylum applications in the US vulnerable to detention by immigration authorities and possible forced return to Afghanistan, where they are at risk of persecution.

A journalist with a major US media outlet said that his former employer—a major US media outlet—told him they could not support his claim out of fear of repercussions from the Trump administration.

## **Recommendations**

### ***To the Taliban:***

- End arbitrary detention, torture, and other ill-treatment of journalists, and free from custody all media workers arbitrarily detained for peaceful expression and reporting.
- End discriminatory restrictions on women journalists and restrictions on women that prevent women journalists from working on an equal basis with men. End restrictions on women speaking to journalists.
- End censorship and arbitrary constraints on journalists' freedom of movement.
- Ensure that official information is publicly available and accessible to the media, that journalists, including women, have access to official events, and that officials respond to journalists' inquiries in a timely manner.
- Ensure transparent and impartial investigations of complaints regarding assaults and threats against journalists.

### ***To Countries Hosting Afghan Refugees:***

- End the forced return of Afghans to Afghanistan and the deportation of Afghans to countries where they are at risk of being forcibly returned. Adhere to commitments not to forcibly return any refugee to Afghanistan because of the risk of refoulement.
- Investigate allegations of ill-treatment of Afghans, including in detention centers, and appropriately discipline or prosecute officials responsible for abuses.
- Increase resettlement of Afghan refugees from Pakistan to third countries and expedite the emergency resettlement of at-risk Afghans.
- Ensure that full and fair consideration is given to all claims by Afghans for international protection.
- Support Afghan media in exile, particularly women journalists, with capacity building and training programs, funding, and mental health resources.

### ***To the Turkish Government:***

- Ensure that Afghan journalists and other at-risk Afghans can apply for international protection or humanitarian residency permits.
- Ensure that exiled Afghan journalists in Türkiye can apply for and obtain work permits.