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Taliban Broadens Crackdown With Detention Of Critical Religious Scholars

- By [Abubakar Siddique](#) and
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The Taliban declared dissent unacceptable after returning to power nearly four years ago. Since then, it has detained, tortured, or forced into exile secular opponents, journalists, and human rights activists.

Now the country's de facto leaders appear to be broadening their crackdown to include Islamic scholars and clerics for publicly criticizing the Taliban's harsh rulings or merely supporting more moderate policies.

Abdul Qadir Qanat, a Muslim cleric in the Afghan capital, Kabul, is one of the most prominent figures detained by the Taliban.

"They tied his hands and sped him away in a vehicle along with his young son," said a friend of Qanat who requested anonymity because he feared reprisals from the Taliban for speaking to RFE/RL's Radio Azadi.

"So far, we don't know why he was detained or what the charges against him are," the friend, who is also a cleric, said of Qanat's arrest in late May. "We are very worried about him because he has diabetes."

Qanat is known for speaking his mind on television talk shows and public speeches.

Qanat and his friend Sirajuddin Nabil have been detained for criticizing the Taliban rule during a public gathering. In January, Qanat and another cleric, Mahmood Hassan, were arrested after they criticized the Taliban's monopoly over power.

Bashir Ahmad Hanafi, a Muslim scholar who has consistently supported the Taliban in the southern province of Helmand, is another prominent figure among those detained by the Taliban's intelligence service.

Hanafi's friends say he was detained by the Taliban spy service soon after he criticized the Taliban's ban on education for Afghan women and teenage girls last month.

Media reports suggest Hanafi has been sentenced to imprisonment for eight months and banned from traveling abroad for two years for "inciting public opinion against the current [political] system."

Radio Azadi repeatedly approached the Taliban intelligence agency's spokesman, Khalil Hamraz for comment, but he didn't respond.

Safia Arefi, a human rights campaigner, told Radio Azadi that the Taliban has shown no tolerance for dissent or criticism.

"The Taliban's treatment of the accused does not take into account any principles or law," she said. "They have not even informed the families of the detainees."

Obaidullah Baheer, a former fellow at the South Asia Center at the London School of Economics, said theocracies such as the Taliban "often conflate political decision-making with religious doctrine," which leaves no margin for disagreement, dissent, or criticism.

He sees the Taliban's crackdown on religious scholars as self-defeating.

"It's a quick and sure way of alienating the local population and taking a hit on the popularity front," he said.

Unlike its brutal regime in the 1990s, the current Taliban government has imposed censorship gradually. It suppressed dissent by targeting various segments of the Afghan society.

It initially faced criticism from the Afghan media and protest demonstrations by women, retirees, and farmers affected by its harsh policies.

It has wiped out independent Afghan media and severely restricted international press from accessing the country. It has tortured and detained hundreds of activists, academics, and journalists to promote a culture of self-censorship and fear.

"There is an understanding that there are consequences for crossing a line that is not very clearly defined," Baheer said. "But anything that even converges on criticism is not tolerated and is then punished."

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