**Background**

The Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in 1996, after a seven-year war that followed the withdrawal of Soviet forces.[[1]](#footnote-1) The growth of al-Qaida during the war against the Soviets created an environment for Osama bin Laden to train terrorists who would eventually attack United States people and property both home and abroad.[[2]](#footnote-2) On September 9, 2001, Al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four passenger planes in the US, two of which flew into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. The other two crashed into the Pentagon and rural Pennsylvania. The attack led to the death of 3,000 people and led to George Bush declaring a “war on terror” and an invasion of Iraq.[[3]](#footnote-3)

While situated in Afghanistan, the U.S. spent over $2.3 trillion in humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to the country.[[4]](#footnote-4) In February 2020, the United States and Taliban began negotiating a complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.[[5]](#footnote-5) These negotiations touched on issues such as education for women and girls, a situation that significantly improved during the US invasion, in contrast with the widespread violation of women’s rights before 2001.[[6]](#footnote-6) In August 2021, the United States withdrew from Afghanistan following 20 years of occupation. Between 2001 and 2021, the US attempted to reconstruct Afghanistan.

On Aug 30, 2021, the US army exited Afghanistan after 20 years of fighting the Taliban. The Taliban swiftly took over the country and made several quick changes. Within weeks, a new cabinet made up of long-time Taliban members was set up to run the state temporarily[[7]](#footnote-7) and the constitution that had been in place since 2004 was suspended.[[8]](#footnote-8) Some of these new government officials have been declared terrorists by the United States and the United Nations.[[9]](#footnote-9) The government model set up was meant to duplicate the “emirate” model used in the nineties.[[10]](#footnote-10) This system was meant to control the population and grow the Taliban’s surveillance over the people.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Following U.S. withdrawal from the country, conditions have grown worse for multiple groups of people who have suffered a decline in respect for civil liberties. Former Afghan civil servants were promised amnesty letters by the Taliban, but many fear that applying for such letters would put themselves at risk.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Taliban has made use of force since it took over Afghanistan, carrying out sweeps through Kabul and scaring residents.[[13]](#footnote-13) While the Taliban claimed the search was to ensure security, some residents of Kabul see these sweeps as a violation of privacy.[[14]](#footnote-14) Extra-judicial killings have become common, with Afghans who had worked with the previous government in some capacity, whether as security forces or politicians, fear for their lives. Uncovered footage shows Taliban fighters assaulting comedian Nazar Mohammed, who had worked for the police.[[15]](#footnote-15) Mohammed was kidnapped and killed by the Taliban. Another former police officer, Bangu Negar, was killed in front of her children while 8 months pregnant.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Censorship of expression has been ongoing in the country, with journalists and artists being forced by the Taliban to put an end to their work. Activists and human rights defenders also continue to suffer from attacks. Journalists have been harassed and beaten for attempting to do their jobs.[[17]](#footnote-17) Press freedom has wholly crumbled, with thousands of journalists and media outlets being closed and one media owner being detained.[[18]](#footnote-18) Taliban fighters have beaten journalists for covering a protest and the home of several have been raided.[[19]](#footnote-19) Reports also state that close relatives of a journalist were attacked, leaving one dead and another injured while searching for the journalist.[[20]](#footnote-20)

One major issue negotiated by the Taliban and the U.S. government before the U.S. eventually leaving the country. Although the Taliban banned forced marriage for women by decree in December 2021,[[21]](#footnote-21) women’s rights have been negatively impacted as was expected. Women have been withheld from fully participating in several aspects of life and there have been reports of harassment and restriction of women all over the country.[[22]](#footnote-22) Women are now required to have a male family member escort them to public places, and cannot dress as they choose or even take public transport on their own.[[23]](#footnote-23) The Taliban has banned women from higher education and has emphasized religious studies.[[24]](#footnote-24) Security for women continues to be a fear and risk as women have been forced out of their jobs and forced into virtual imprisonment in their homes.[[25]](#footnote-25) Female journalists have been pulled off the air, prevented entry from stations, and told to stay home until they were asked to report to work.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The rise of the Taliban in 2021 also revived fears among the ethnic Hazara minority that their group could be the victims of a genocide.[[27]](#footnote-27) These fears were based on their experiences with targeted violence by the Taliban before the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, and since the withdrawal, violence against them has increased.[[28]](#footnote-28) In 2021, nine Hazara men were killed in the Ghazni province. Six were shot to death, and the three died from torture which included strangulation and the cutting of arm muscles.[[29]](#footnote-29) Other actions against members of this ethnic group have included the looting of their homes and severe beating. Such actions violate international human rights treaties such as the Geneva Convention and are regarded as war crimes.[[30]](#footnote-30)

One of the methods being used by the Taliban is to threaten families of their targets. Reports state that the Taliban has killed and targeted members of the former security force and their family members.[[31]](#footnote-31) Some former officials have received letters threatening the arrest of their family members should they not willingly give themselves up.[[32]](#footnote-32) The brother of a former Afghan vice president, who was known for his anti-Taliban position, was executed days after the Taliban took control over the Panjshir valley.[[33]](#footnote-33) An activist, Fahima Rahmati’s family has received death threats against her and her family and in one instance, a group claiming association with the Taliban, beat up her family after entering her home.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Members of the LGBTI community are not immune to harsh treatment from the Taliban. Ordinarily, domestic law introduced in Afghanistan in 2018 criminalizes same sex relations.[[35]](#footnote-35) With the reintroduction of Sharia law by the Taliban, fears are growing about how such persons would be treated.[[36]](#footnote-36) Based on the Sharia law practiced by the Taliban, homosexuality is punishable by death.[[37]](#footnote-37) Members of the LGBTI community interviewed by Human Rights Watch told stories of being attacked and in some cases sexually assaulted due to their orientation.[[38]](#footnote-38) A young man was reportedly beaten and dragged from his house before being beheaded in Kabul late last year, leading his boyfriend to go on the run.[[39]](#footnote-39) Many have fled their homes and seek relocation because of the risk of being caught.

The rise of the Taliban has spelled the end of life as they know it for different social and political groups. Some, like women, had enjoyed some semblance of freedom prior to U.S. evacuation and have to watch the developments over the last few decades disappear. Others, like them members of the LGBTI community still face risks that have only seemed to increase with the takeover of the country.

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