

1.1.2. Criticism on social media, and online surveillance

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The de facto authorities' stance on social media has been growing stricter,[118] with increasing restrictions.[119] The de facto Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) publicly warned of 'improper' social media usage and communicated that legal action will be taken 'against pages, accounts, and networks […] undermining religious beliefs, public morality, and societal values.'[120] Starting in mid-September 2025, the de facto authorities gradually closed down internet services in some provinces,[121] and eventually, on 29 September 2025, switched off internet in the entire country for 48 hours.[122] The shutdown of the state-controlled fibre-optic network, on which also private providers highly rely on, virtually left all Afghans without internet connectivity.[123] Telecommunications were also disrupted, and people could not make mobile phone calls or send SMS.[124] No official reason has been announced for the shutdown,[125] although some sources suggest that it was an attempt to crack down on 'immoral activities'.[126]

The de facto authorities monitor social media[127] and target individuals who criticise them online.[128] The de facto MPVPV claim to monitor online content,[129] and the de facto General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) has reportedly been monitoring journalists, activists and social media users,[130] and has a dedicated digital surveillance unit that monitors online activities, according to Amu TV.[131] The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan reported on local sources warning of the 'extensive use' of digital and in-person surveillance, including surveillance of social media, mobile-phone searches at checkpoints, and the use of informants. Media and civil society actors further told the UN Special Rapporteur that critical posts on social media might trigger 'house searches, arbitrary arrests and detention', including of family members. These measures reportedly contributed to 'a climate of fear' and self-censorship, including among Afghans abroad fearing for the safety of remaining family members.[132] The Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) carried out interviews with several sources operating on the ground, that told them that 'the situation in Afghanistan is becoming increasingly restrictive' making it 'difficult to report on the few freedoms or niches that still exist', and that the facto authorities monitor 'all information and reporting' on Afghanistan closely. One interviewee told ACCORD that Afghans are afraid of expressing anything openly on social media due to the surveillance.[133] Rahimi explained that the de facto authorities do not have the sophisticated bureaucracy and surveillance system as, for example, China and Iran, which makes it difficult for them to

trace information from anonymous accounts. Individuals who are identified as being critics may however face serious consequences.134 Timor Sharan, Director of Afghanistan Policy Lab, noted that not only have the Taliban engaged in online surveillance, but have also been extremely effective in penetrating society through human assets, including with informants in mosques, among neighbours and the general population. This gives the Taliban great reach and scale in terms of surveillance.135

In May 2025, Afghanistan International reported on the de facto MPVPV arresting 'several social media users' for 'illegitimate' activities online, and outlined two cases in which TikTok content creators were arrested.136 TikTok is prohibited in Afghanistan, but remains a popular platform among the younger generation.137 One of the men appeared in a video published by a de facto MPVPV spokesperson 'confessing' that he had been detained for speaking with women during livestreams on TikTok.138 On 27 July 2025, Amu TV reported on dozens of individuals being arrested across Afghanistan over the past month, including seven journalists, for positing 'un-Islamic' content on social media.139 Afghan human rights organisation Rawadari also documented 'numerous' arrests in the first half of 2025 of individuals posting critical content on social media. The four examples outlined by Rawadari included local journalists and civil activists that were imprisoned for three days or longer. One individual was sentenced to six months in prison.140 There were moreover reports of women working for the de facto authorities to monitor Instagram accounts and report cases of women posting photos with their face uncovered.141 The de facto authorities have also been reacting to critical publications of exile media by investigating journalists in Afghanistan, and targeting individuals suspected of collaborating with Afghan exile media.142

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