

4.7. Human rights defenders and activists

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Since the Taliban takeover, the space for Afghanistan's civil society has narrowed significantly,¹⁵⁷¹ in parallel to a gradual deterioration of the general human rights situation.¹⁵⁷² Already in the first weeks after their takeover, the Taliban introduced restrictions on demonstrations, requiring them to have prior official approval,¹⁵⁷³ and dissolved existing human rights protection bodies.¹⁵⁷⁴ Human rights organisations have faced administrative pressure, including demands to re-register, having bank accounts frozen, and certain activities barred.¹⁵⁷⁵ Since 2023, CIVICUS has rated civic space in Afghanistan as 'closed'¹⁵⁷⁶ which is the worst ranking on the organisations five-point scale.¹⁵⁷⁷ More information on civic space in Afghanistan is available in section [1.1.1. Political opposition and civic space](#).

According to Bertelsmann Stiftung, reporting in 2024, civil society activities have nearly vanished, and only international NGOs and humanitarian aid organisations remain.¹⁵⁷⁸ Almost all experienced human rights defenders have left Afghanistan,¹⁵⁷⁹ and those who remain are not able to work openly, but have been forced to find clandestine ways of working.¹⁵⁸⁰

Local and international NGOs operate in a restrictive environment.¹⁵⁸¹ Although some have taken adaptive measures, many civil society organisations, advocacy groups and professional associations have halted all activities.¹⁵⁸² One anonymous interviewee told ACCORD that 'humanitarian organisations were not as severely affected as other NGOs by restrictions introduced by the de facto authorities.¹⁵⁸³ Similarly, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan reported that NGOs 'have been limited to humanitarian- and development-related activities' and have been limiting their activities in public awareness on issues such as health and hygiene, peacebuilding, and advocacy, including human rights promotion, as the de facto Ministry of Economy discouraged such activities at the end of 2023.¹⁵⁸⁴ ACCORD reported on NGOs and international organisations having been 'severely restricted in advocating for certain issues, such as women's rights', and a sources described sensitivities around terms such as 'human rights', 'women's voices', 'gender-based violence', 'democracy' or 'gender equality'.¹⁵⁸⁵ Women are forbidden from working for UN agencies,¹⁵⁸⁶ and the de facto authorities have called on NGOs to suspend female staff or risk losing their licenses.¹⁵⁸⁷ NGOs reported on documents signed by women staff being rejected by the de facto authorities, and that they faced pressure to replace women leaders with men.¹⁵⁸⁸

The de facto authorities cracked down on human rights defenders immediately after their takeover,¹⁵⁸⁹ in particular on protesting women activists who faced torture,¹⁵⁹⁰ imprisonment, and threats to their families.¹⁵⁹¹ Critical voices, including civil society activists and human rights defenders, have continued to face arbitrary arrest, enforce disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment as well as extrajudicial killings.¹⁵⁹² Other sources also reported on activists facing arbitrarily arrest after criticising the Taliban,¹⁵⁹³ and that arrests, disappearances and torture have been used to silence and prevent civil engagement.¹⁵⁹⁴ Rawadari reported that at least 32 civil society activists and human rights defenders, including 5 women, were arbitrarily arrested during the first half of 2025. Charges included organising training courses for women, campaigning against the Taliban or criticising their policies.¹⁵⁹⁵

Sources reported on family members of *inter alia* human rights defenders and activists sometimes being affected by the de facto authorities' crackdown on dissent,¹⁵⁹⁶ including intimidation or reprisals,¹⁵⁹⁷ and threats extending to family members of critics.¹⁵⁹⁸ Some human rights defenders in exile have reportedly reduced their visibility fearing for the safety of remaining family members.¹⁵⁹⁹ More information on family members of critical voices is available in chapter 4.11. in the report [2024 EUAA Country Focus – Afghanistan](#).

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