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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