

NOW AND THEN: GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM UNDER THE TALIBAN

Executive Summary

Between 2004 and 2021, the reforms implemented by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan allowed civil society in Afghanistan to flourish and grow to an unprecedented degree. However, in the aftermath of the Taliban's recapture of the country in August 2021, the human rights situation has rapidly deteriorated, leading to an upheaval of Afghan civil society.

"Now and Then: Grassroots Activism Under the Taliban", a new report produced by Freedom Now and Hogan Lovells, aims to analyze the changes in Afghan civil society by providing a detailed account of (1) the hostile environment faced by civil society under Taliban rule, (2) the changes in civil society that this new environment has spurred, and (3) how grassroots activists and movements are continuing to promote human rights in spite of Taliban repression. In addition to the factual analysis, the report also provides recommendations to various international stakeholders about how these actors may better support the grassroots activists in this challenging environment.

The research for the report is composed of a survey of current Afghan civil society, interviews with current and former civil society members, and desk research of domestic and international law concerning civil society and non-governmental organizations ("NGOs"). Additionally, where useful, the report relies upon publicly available news accounts to provide helpful context for topics raised by interviewees.

The report finds that Afghan civil society operates in a harsh environment and in response, civil society has undergone a substantial transformation in both composition and operating means. As these restrictions have forced official human rights bodies and traditional NGOs to cease operations, grassroots organizations have become the central advocates for safeguarding these rights.

Survey responses tended to focus on four issue areas that are severely impacting civil society operation:



Safety and security:

Most respondents surveyed fear persecution from the Taliban, ranging from imprisonment to extrajudicial killings in the most severe cases. Due to these safety and security concerns, prompted by the experiences of many leaders and volunteers being threatened and harassed at public events, most organizations have had to move their work out of the public sphere.



Taliban restrictions:

Relatedly, many individuals and groups that aim to promote education and human rights, as well as address other crucial social issues face an increasingly hostile environment as a result of policies and practices which have been implemented since the regime change in 2021, many of which are directly hostile to the rights which these actors (also known as human rights defenders) seek to safeguard and promote.



Financial challenges:

While both international and domestic funding was previously available, since 2021 none of the organizations surveyed have received any from either source, and are solely reliant on local fundraising and self-funding. Of those surveyed, two organizations have been able to rely on membership fees and online fundraising to support their work, while the vast majority (90%) have never received any kind of funding. Without a reliable source of income, these organizations are forced to operate on a shoestring budget, hindering their ability to carry out activities effectively.



Sustainability and long-term growth:

While many grassroots organizations continue to operate within Afghanistan, it is clear that ever-present security threats and inaccessibility of funding will severely hamper the sustainability or long-term ability of these organizations to continue to grow and operate within the country.



Recommendations

Drawn from the needs expressed by grassroots civil society, our recommendations are addressed to the following international actors: the donor community; international organizations with a presence in Afghanistan; foreign governments; the United Nations and related international institutions; exiled members of Afghanistan's civil society and other international NGOs.



Donor Community:

The recommendations to the donor community center around acknowledging and adapting to the changes in Afghan civil society. Donors should recognize the increased proportion of grassroots movements and ensure that grant applications are accessible to grassroots civil society members that are newly formed or that have limited administrative capacity. Additionally, donors should consider providing dedicated funding for capacity-strengthening and the expansion of grassroots civil society organizations, as well as for addressing mental health and well-being challenges faced by civic actors.



International organizations with a presence in Afghanistan:

The recommendations for international NGOs operating in Afghanistan urge organizations to conduct regular and comprehensive risk assessments for in-country staff and volunteers, and adopt harm-mitigation policies. Insofar as it is relevant to their work, international NGOs should be sure to engage and involve grassroots civil society and women-led movements in program planning and decision-making, while elevating the voices of marginalized communities throughout interactions with the Taliban and the international community.



Foreign Governments:

The recommendations for foreign governments seeking to promote human rights in Afghanistan involve recognizing the role of grassroots civil society, especially women-led movements, in defending civic space in Afghanistan. Governments that provide civil society funding should adopt the recommendations suggested for the donor community, ensuring that long-term funding is allocated towards growing grassroots civil society organizations. Importantly, foreign governments should provide safe and expedited pathways, including visas to third-party countries, for civic actors whose lives are at risk under Taliban rule.



United Nations:

The recommendations for the UN and its constituent arms advise prioritizing the protection of civic actors. Specifically, the UN should devote resources and attention to negotiating the release of imprisoned activists from Taliban prisons. Moreover, the UN should prioritize consultations with diverse groups of Afghans on a regular basis, including grassroots civic collectives, to inform and shape UNAMA's strategy and engagement with the Taliban.



Afghanistan civil society in exile and other international NGOs:

The recommendations for those activists in exile and international organizations primarily concern elevating the messages of grassroots movements in the country, including those of women human rights defenders. The work of international NGOs should also aim to support grassroots activists within Afghanistan with capacity strengthening resources and support in the form of mentorship in order to enhance and expand their work. Exiled civil society and international NGOs, when possible, should also advocate for safe pathways and visas for civil society members for whom it is no longer remain safe in Afghanistan.

Grassroots civic organizations remain vital agents of positive change, embodying the spirit of activism and community engagement. It is incumbent upon the international community to recognize and seriously consider their work, while also providing them with the necessary support to amplify their impact. Doing so will contribute to the advancement of human rights, social justice and sustainable development in communities around the world. Together, we can create a more inclusive and equitable future for all.



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