

Afghan women bear brunt of religious restrictions

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Religious freedom in Afghanistan has deteriorated since the Taliban seized control two years ago, and Afghan women have suffered most, a report from the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) stated.

The report, "[Issue Update: Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Afghanistan](#)," said all Afghans have seen their religious freedom restricted by the Taliban's edicts, decrees and circular letters, but "those restrictions have disproportionately impacted women."

"Despite attempts to project a more moderate stance, they have imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law that purposefully undermines the rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities," the report stated.

Ruled by strict Sunni reading of Shari'a

Afghanistan's government no longer recognizes the legitimacy of its 2004 constitution, because the Taliban view it as "insufficiently" Islamic.

"In the absence of a formal written constitution, the Taliban have repeatedly professed that Shari'a and the Qur'an are the basis for law in the country," the report stated.

Supreme Leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada is Afghanistan's highest authority for issuing decrees and edicts, based on a strict Sunni interpretation of Islamic law.

A law passed in July replaced the Office of the State Secretary General with the Directorate General of Supervision and Pursuit of Decrees. The same law gave the supreme leader total authority to oversee the implementation of rules, laws and decrees.

When the Taliban came to power in August 2021, it claimed Afghan women would retain their rights “within the bounds of Islamic law.”

However, more than half of the 80 religious edicts issued since then directly restrict the rights of women and girls. Edicts include bans on education, employment and freedom of movement, the report stated. A decree also barred women from driving motor vehicles.

Women punished for ‘un-Islamic’ behavior

In September 2021, the Taliban replaced the Ministry of Women’s Affairs with the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which enforces punishment for “un-Islamic” behavior.

“The action allowed the Taliban to enforce regulations on women in society without their participation or input,” the report stated.

In addition to enforcing restrictions on how women dress, the law also has resulted in the arbitrary arrest of women for “moral crimes,” such as participating in public protests.

Since the Taliban came to power, women have not been allowed to attend school in classes with male students or male teachers. They are barred from studying certain subjects, such as journalism, law, agriculture and the sciences.

In testimony presented to the U.S. Commission on International Religious

Freedom at a hearing one year ago, [Fereshta Abbasi of Human Rights Watch](#) stated nearly all of the rules and policies implemented in Afghanistan since the Taliban came to power “severely restrict Afghans’ basic human rights, and in particular the rights of women and girls.”

“There is no other country in the world where women face such sweeping violations of their basic human rights,” Abbasi said.

Rights of religious minorities restricted

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom update also noted serious restrictions on the freedom of religious minorities in Afghanistan. Shi’a Muslims represent between 10 percent and 15 percent of the total population. The nation also is home to a small number of Sufi, Ahmadi, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha’is, Buddhists, Zoroastrians and Christians.

“The Taliban consider conversion from Islam to another religion apostasy and punishable by death, according to their interpretation of Shari’a,” the report stated.

The commission update noted reports the Taliban has “placed bounties on Afghan Christians, encouraging people to turn them into the authorities for financial rewards, which has forced the group to observe their faith in secret.”

This also is consistent with statements Abbasi made in the hearing last year.

“Religious freedom does not exist in Afghanistan,” Abbasi said. “The Taliban are failing to protect Afghanistan’s religious minorities from violence, and are subjecting some groups to persecution.”

The update said the commission “continues to urge U.S. government officials to incorporate discussion of the need for protections for freedom of religion or belief in dialogue with the Taliban and to publicly condemn the ongoing violations against minority populations.”

The commission’s annual report recommended the U.S. Department of State designate Afghanistan a Country of Particular Concern for its “systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.”

The commission also urged Congress to expand its Priority 2 designation that grants refugee admission status to certain Afghan nationals and family members to include “religious minorities at extreme risk of religious persecution.”

Last November, the State Department designated the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern for perpetrating severe violations of religious freedom.