

Human rights may worsen in Afghanistan, panel says

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Human rights and religious freedom in Afghanistan have deteriorated since the Taliban regained control in 2021, and recent executive orders by President Donald Trump could make matters worse, expert panelists testified during a March 19 hearing.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom convened the virtual hearing on “Religious Freedom Conditions in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan.” Commission Chair Stephen Schneck and Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik moderated the hearing.

In his introductory remarks, Schneck observed the Taliban intensified its “crackdown” on religious minorities last year, enacting edicts to severely limit the religious freedom of all people in Afghanistan—including Muslims who hold to less-restrictive interpretations of Sharia.

The edicts “disproportionately impacted Afghan women and girls,” subjecting them to arbitrary arrest, forced disappearance and harassment, he said.

At the same time, Islamic State-Khorasan Province targeted religious minorities, such as the Hazara Shi’a people, he added.

Several panelists noted the negative impact of executive orders cutting foreign aid and “a high level of uncertainty” regarding policies regarding the resettlement of refugees and asylum-seekers.

‘May constitute crimes against humanity’

Richard Bennett, United Nations Rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan, reported “systemic gender-based oppression” and repressive laws focused on ethnic and religious minorities—and noted “early warning signs” of worsening conditions.

He pointed to the Taliban’s law on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which limits freedom of expression and religion and places even greater restriction on the rights of women and girls, as well as cultural and ethnic minorities.

“Expanding restrictions amount to institutionalized persecution, which may constitute crimes against humanity,” he said.

Bennett called for an “all-tools approach” to holding the Taliban accountable for its disregard for religious freedom and international human rights standards, rather than seeking a single “silver bullet” solution.

However, he said, cutting foreign aid “turns hope into despair.” Instead, he urged the United States to support those inside Afghanistan who are “speaking up and standing up for human rights” within an ever-shrinking civic space.

‘Worst situation in the world for women’

The Taliban “doubled down on extremist policies” in recent months, said Rina Amiri, former special envoy for Afghan women, girls and human rights at the U.S. Department of State.

Afghanistan remains “the worst situation in the world for women,”  Amiri said. Any international engagement with the Taliban should prioritize human rights—particularly the rights of women and girls, she insisted.

Metra Mehran with Amnesty International similarly denounced the “draconian laws” the Taliban instituted to deprive women of their rights to education, employment, mobility and “to practice their faith freely.”

The Taliban has taken steps to “criminalize the voice of women” by barring them from reciting the Quran in front of other adult women, she noted.

Mehran called on the U.S. Department of State to renew the designation of the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern for its “systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.”

She also urged the United States not to “hinder lifesaving support for the persecuted” people of Afghanistan.

Fereshta Abbasi, researcher in the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, called for an independent and comprehensive mechanism to hold the Taliban accountable for its ongoing abuse and human rights violations in Afghanistan.

‘Practice their faith in secret or in isolation’

Joseph Azam, board chair of the Afghan-American Foundation, called Afghanistan “one of the most repressive countries in the world.”

Anyone who rejects the Taliban’s extreme interpretation of Sharia is “left to live in constant fear” of being targeted by apostasy and blasphemy laws, Azam observed. Religious minorities must “practice their faith in secret or

in isolation,” he said.

Azam emphasized the importance not only of continuing humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan, but also using non-state entities to “prevent the Taliban from interfering” with its delivery.

Kate Clark, senior analyst and co-director of the Afghanistan Analyst Network, pointed out the Taliban believe they are “ruling through divine grace,” and they inherited a functioning state structure that allows them to enforce their authoritarian rule.

The police have “unchecked power” to enforce the edicts in the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, she noted.

If and when positive change occurs in Afghanistan, it will “come from the inside”—from Afghan civic organizations and individuals who are standing for human rights and religious freedom, she asserted.

Those groups depend on “predictable funding” from outside sources—primarily the U.S. Agency for International Development, where funding was frozen by an executive order, Clark said.