

Series of Strategic Dialogue of Afghanistan's HRDs

Prospects of HRDs in Afghanistan

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Conference Paper

The military takeover by the Taliban in Afghanistan was a serious blow to human rights and democratic values in the country. The Taliban, as the current duty-bearer, not only failed to comply with Afghanistan's human rights obligations, but have also dismantled the country's existing national human rights protection mechanisms and democratic institutions. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Electoral bodies, Ministry of Women Affairs, and both houses of parliament were among critical democratic institutions that have been dissolved by the Taliban. Likewise, supporting legal systems, including the 2004 constitution, have been effectively replaced with harsh policies.

The Taliban's systemic gender discriminatory policies have deprived women and girls in Afghanistan from their social, economic, and cultural rights. Women were barred from employment and girls from education, leading to gender persecution and institutionalizing the concept of gender apartheid. Additionally, the Taliban's policies and treatment of ethnic groups and religious minorities have largely led to their marginalization, particularly affecting their right to participate in socio-economic and political life.

Targeted and extrajudicial killings and arrests of former members of the national security forces, as well as public executions and floggings of suspects, indicate gross human rights violations by the Taliban.

Meanwhile, the closure of civic space and growing repression of media outlets in Afghanistan provided the Taliban a carte Blanche to further perpetuate atrocities and human rights violations. Growing threats and violence against media workers, journalists, human rights activists, and their family members have led to a climate of fear and censorship, leaving the public unable to raise their concerns.

Given the ongoing extent of atrocities and human rights violations in Afghanistan, it is of utmost importance to keep Afghanistan on the spotlight and is a shared responsibility to hold the Taliban accountable for their systemic violations and abuses of human rights.

On December 10, 2023, Human Rights Defenders Plus (HRD+), a network of Afghan human rights defenders (HRDs), thus, initiated the conference on the "Prospects of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan" in Berlin, Germany. The conference brought together 70 prominent Afghanistan's human rights activists to discuss the human rights situation in Afghanistan. The conference was also attended virtually by the UN Special Rapporteur, Mr. Richard Bennett.

The event, which also coincided with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, represented a united stand, raised awareness, shared experiences, and important dialog to mobilize international attention and action in response to the ongoing systemic human rights violations by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The conference aims to promote harmony and collaboration among human rights defenders, advocate for human rights principles collectively, and establish a foundation for cooperative efforts in a constructive manner.

The participants attended the conference were selected through a careful selection process, given their human rights background and abased on a balanced ethnic and gender representation. After the opening remarks, the conference was followed by an expert panel and afterwards the participants were divided into four working groups, exchanged their ideas and shared their thoughts around pre-defined topics of concerns as below.

Working group I: Future of human rights-oriented organizations in Afghanistan;

Working group II: Human rights defenders and the international human rights mechanisms such as treaty bodies, the Universal Periodic Review, and special procedures;

Working group III: International support and the role of international watchdogs; and

Working group IV: The role of human rights defenders in promoting and protecting human rights through media and social media.

The working groups and second panel have put forward a list of practical recommendations for action around the four above-mentioned topics that have been summarized as below:

A. To Afghanistan's human rights activists, CSOs and diaspora groups:

1. Establish coordination councils with a focus on strengthening effective collaboration between various civil society and human rights stakeholders on Afghanistan, as well as with a focus on advocacy through relevant institutions in host countries in exile;
2. Document current human rights violations in Afghanistan so that they can be used for advocacy and accountability efforts through international accountability mechanisms;
3. Work with and assist the Special Rapporteur in collecting data and documentation on various issues of human rights violations in Afghanistan;
4. Support existing mechanisms, including the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, thematic mandate holders, treaty bodies, the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court through shadow reports, complaints and other forms of communication;

5. Communicate with other relevant UN agencies to implement the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan;
6. Contribute to the National Report for the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for Afghanistan and support the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations Office in Geneva in preparing and drafting the UPR;
7. Advocate for the establishment of a strong accountability mechanism for Afghanistan that has the capacity and resources to monitor, document, follow-up and preserve the violations and abuses happening in Afghanistan by the Member and Observer States of the UN Human Rights Council;
8. Seek transparency from relevant national authorities on their financial support to Afghanistan to ensure that humanitarian aid does not benefit the Taliban and its security sector in particular;
9. Establish and expand partnerships and collaboration between national and international media to disseminate cases and reports of human rights violations, conduct live events and conferences, and other effective programs to raise awareness and maintain pressure on the Taliban;
10. Prioritize the digital and physical security of human rights defenders in Afghanistan in using technologies or platforms to connect with people in Afghanistan, both for receiving information and for sending information;
11. Scheming new ways to reflect on the ongoing atrocities and human rights violations in Afghanistan through, for instance, stories, reports, statistics, short documentary films or photo exhibitions to communicate the local narratives;
12. Work with a unified voice and strategy to deter the Taliban and their supporters and lobbyists who campaign and propagandize on social media to whitewash the Taliban and change public opinion;
13. Raise awareness among CSOs and HRDs about existing accountability mechanisms, their mandates, working methods and ways to proactively engage and share relevant data, information and complaints about any potential efforts lobbying for the Taliban in Western countries;
14. Continue and expand the series of dialogue among Afghansitan HRDs that will result in a process to craft a roadmap for Afghansitan.

B. To the international community:

1. Avoid whitewashing the Taliban for its massive human rights abuses, and maintain and increase pressure on the regime to hold it accountable;

2. Request the Special Rapporteur (SR) on Afghanistan to provide a self-assessment of his mandate, outlining whether it is adequate given the gravity of violations and abuses with a view to identify gaps and mitigate weaknesses;
3. Establish a coordination mechanism within the UN human rights system to follow up on the recommendations of the Special Rapporteurs' and other relevant mechanisms focusing on Afghanistan;
4. Pressure the Taliban to end its ethnic and gender based discriminatory policies and directives and to comply with Afghanistan's international human rights obligations;
5. Bring the Taliban to justice at the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice for their gross violations and abuses of human rights;
6. Support Afghanistan's CSOs in exile to raise awareness of the possible "individual complaints" to the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies and other related accountability mechanisms for human rights violations;
7. Assist Afghanistan's CSOs in exile to create and produce lived stories and documentaries on human rights violations in Afghanistan and learn from best practices and experiences of other CSOs in exile dealing with similar politically sensitive situations.

For further information

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