

POLICY BRIEF

FIVE YEARS UNDER TALIBAN RULE (2021-2026):

A systematic destruction of human dignity, privacy and rule of law in Afghanistan



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*Human dignity is not merely another human right.
It is the foundation upon which every other human right depends.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five years after the Taliban returned to power on 15 August 2021, Afghanistan has undergone one of the most profound reversals of human rights in its contemporary history. Along with the international community rightly focused on gender apartheid, the exclusion of women and girls from public life, and the collapse of democratic institutions, another dimension of the Taliban's policies needs to be underlined: systematic erosion of human dignity and the right to privacy.

Since August 2021, Taliban has issued hundreds of decrees, directives, verbal orders, and administrative instructions affecting nearly every aspect of everyday life. These measures extend far beyond regulating public institutions. They increasingly regulate personal appearance, family relations, education, employment, communication, religious practice, movement, cultural expression, and even activities inside private homes. The cumulative effect is the transformation of Afghanistan into a society governed not merely through law but through pervasive surveillance, fear, and moral control.

This report of HRD+ argues that the Taliban's restrictions should not be understood as isolated violations of individual rights. Rather, they constitute an integrated system of governance that progressively dismantles personal autonomy and replaces rights-based governance with ideological control. This governance model undermines the legal protections guaranteed under international human rights law, including the right to privacy under Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and erodes the institutional foundations necessary for justice, economic development, and sustainable peace.

Drawing upon a chronology of Taliban decrees and directives issued between August 2021 and June 2026, this report identifies recurring patterns of state intrusion into private life, institutional dismantling, arbitrary punishment, and surveillance. It concludes that the destruction of human dignity is not only a humanitarian concern but also a structural obstacle to Afghanistan's future recovery.

1. Introduction

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan following the collapse of the Islamic Republic. Initially, Taliban leaders sought to reassure both the Afghan population and the international community that they would respect rights "within the framework of Islamic law." Early public statements included announcements of a general amnesty and [invitations for women to participate in government](#).

Within days, however, these assurances began to give way to a rapidly expanding series of restrictions. On 20 August 2021, Taliban forces conducted house-to-house searches targeting journalists and individuals associated with the former Republic. Only five days later, women were instructed to remain at home because Taliban fighters were "[not trained to respect women](#)."

These early measures foreshadowed a broader transformation. Over the following five years, the Taliban progressively dismantled institutions protecting rights, restricted civic space, subordinated the judiciary, and expanded state control into the most intimate dimensions of everyday life.

Much of the international discourse has understandably focused on the Taliban's systematic discrimination against women and girls. Yet the broader implications of Taliban governance [extend beyond gender discrimination](#). Their policies increasingly regulate how Afghans dress, where they travel, whom they may meet, what they may study, how they communicate, and even what takes place within their homes. These measures affect women most severely, but they also reshape the lives of men, families, professionals, educators, journalists, entrepreneurs, artists, and religious minorities.

This policy brief therefore examines Taliban governance through the interconnected concepts of human dignity, privacy, and the rule of law. It argues that attacks on these foundational principles weaken not only individual rights but also Afghanistan's capacity for justice, social cohesion, and long-term development.

2. Methodology

This policy brief is based primarily on the documentation of the Taliban's decrees, orders, and policies violating human rights, compiled by HRD+ and other national and international organizations.

Rather than analysing each decree individually, this report identifies recurring patterns of governance and examines how these measures collectively transform the relationship between the individual and the state.

The report also draws upon established principles of international human rights law, particularly those concerning human dignity, privacy, liberty, equality before the law, and due process.

3. Human Dignity and Privacy in International Human Rights Law

Human dignity is the normative foundation of modern international human rights law. Although no universal definition exists, international instruments consistently recognize that every individual possesses inherent worth that must be respected by the state.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that:

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

This principle underpins subsequent human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Afghanistan remains a State Party. Changes in political authority do not alter the state's treaty obligations.

Among the rights most relevant to this report is Article 17 of the ICCPR, which provides protection against arbitrary or unlawful interference with a person's privacy, family, home, or correspondence. The Human Rights Committee has interpreted this provision broadly, emphasizing that states must refrain from unjustified intrusions into private life and ensure legal safeguards against abuse.

Privacy under international law encompasses more than freedom from unlawful searches. It protects personal autonomy, family relationships, communications, identity, and the ability to make ordinary life decisions without arbitrary state interference. It is closely linked to freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, and equality before the law.

Afghanistan is also bound by obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention against Torture (CAT). Together, these instruments require the state to respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of all people without discrimination.

This legal framework provides the benchmark against which Taliban policies should be assessed.

4. From Rights Restrictions to Systemic Social Control

Authoritarian governments often restrict political participation. What distinguishes Taliban governance is the extent to which state authority extends into the private sphere.

During the first months following the Taliban takeover, restrictions primarily targeted political actors, journalists, and women. House-to-house searches, the replacement of government institutions, and the prohibition of protests were among the earliest measures.

Within weeks, however, the scope of regulation expanded dramatically. Girls were excluded from secondary education, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was abolished and replaced by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, and professional women were ordered to remain at home.

These developments marked a transition from political control toward comprehensive social regulation.

Over the following years, Taliban authorities increasingly governed through decrees regulating clothing, hairstyles and men facial hair, education, travel, employment, religious observance, weddings, artistic expression, digital communication, healthcare, business practices, recreational activities; and family relationships.

Individually, some of these restrictions might appear administrative. Collectively, however, they constitute a governance model in which the state increasingly determines how citizens should live their everyday lives.

5. The progressive elimination of human dignity

Human dignity requires that individuals possess autonomy over fundamental aspects of their lives. It presupposes that people may make ordinary decisions concerning education, employment, appearance, family life, movement, and participation in society without arbitrary coercion.

The Taliban's decrees demonstrate a progressive narrowing of that autonomy.

5.1 Women's autonomy

Within one month of taking power, girls were prohibited from attending secondary school.

Professional women were instructed to remain at home until further notice.

Women were later prohibited from travelling long distances without a male guardian, while drivers were instructed not to transport women who did not comply with Taliban dress requirements.

In March 2022, a verbal order reportedly prohibited women from working in offices and instructed that women should not leave their homes. Subsequent measures expanded these restrictions further and women were prohibited from obtaining driving licences and were prevented from using public transportation without a male guardian. Female television presenters were required to wear mandatory face coverings while on air, further limiting women's visibility in the public sphere. Higher education was effectively closed to women through the prohibition of female students from attending universities. The Taliban also banned women from working for both national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), severely restricting their economic participation and humanitarian engagement. In addition, beauty salons operated by women were ordered to close nationwide, eliminating one of the few remaining sources of female employment and entrepreneurship. Collectively, these measures formed part of a broader policy aimed at systematically excluding women from education, employment, mobility, and public life.

These measures affect far more than women's participation in public life. They progressively deny women legal, economic, educational, and social autonomy, undermining their status as equal rights holders.

5.2 Men's autonomy

Although women have borne the greatest burden of Taliban restrictions, men have also become subject to increasing regulation.

On 28 March 2022, male civil servants were ordered to grow beards or risk dismissal.

Later directives required government employees to participate in compulsory religious instruction and examinations as a condition of employment.

Monitoring reports issued by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice assessed whether health workers complied with beard and appearance requirements.

More recent reports outside the chronology have documented arbitrary arrests of young men based on hairstyles, clothing, or alleged non-compliance with Taliban appearance standards. These developments indicate an expansion of state authority over personal identity and bodily autonomy.

Human dignity cannot flourish where individuals must seek official approval for their appearance, education, employment, or movement.

6. The Destruction of Privacy and the Private Sphere

Privacy as a Human Right

Privacy is often narrowly understood as protection against arbitrary searches of one's home. International human rights law, however, recognizes privacy as a much broader concept encompassing personal autonomy, family life, correspondence, identity, and the freedom to make ordinary life decisions without unjustified state interference. Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protects individuals against arbitrary or unlawful interference with their "privacy, family, home or correspondence."

Privacy is essential because it creates the space in which individuals develop personal beliefs, educate their children, form relationships, express opinions, practice religion, participate in civic engagement and participate in society free from fear. When governments systematically intrude into this private sphere, the result is not simply the violation of an individual right; it fundamentally transforms the relationship between citizens and the state and drastically shrank space for civil society.

During the past five years, Taliban governance has increasingly blurred the distinction between public authority and private life. Rather than limiting regulation to public institutions, Taliban authorities have progressively extended their authority into homes, families, workplaces, schools, religious practices, and personal relationships.

6.1 House-to-House Searches: The Beginning of Systematic Intrusion

Only five days after taking control of Kabul, Taliban forces began conducting house-to-house searches targeting human rights defenders, journalists, former government employees, members of the security forces, and individuals associated with foreign governments.

On 20 August 2021 Taliban carried out house to house search looking for journalists and individuals with ties to the republic and Western forces. Although these operations were initially justified as security measures, they established a dangerous precedent: the private home was no longer protected from arbitrary state intervention.

Under international human rights law, searches of private homes require clear legal authority, necessity, proportionality, and judicial safeguards. The widespread and often arbitrary nature of these searches undermined these protections and contributed to a climate in which private homes could no longer be regarded as safe spaces beyond government control.

The significance of these early operations extends beyond their immediate impact. They marked the beginning of a governance model in which the Taliban increasingly [viewed private homes as sites for monitoring political loyalty](#), enforcing ideological conformity, and suppressing dissent.

6.2 Institutionalizing Surveillance

The chronology demonstrates that Taliban governance gradually evolved from sporadic searches to systematic surveillance. [One of the clearest examples](#) appears in October 2023, when the General Directorate of Intelligence in Helmand instructed local religious and community leaders to collect extensive personal information about residents:

Imams and neighborhood representatives (Wakeels and Arbabs) were instructed to compile detailed lists of residents, including copies of national identity cards, full addresses, telephone numbers, and to monitor attendance at the five daily prayers. Individuals missing prayers for three consecutive days were to be reported.

This directive represents far more than religious administration. It transforms religious leaders into agents of surveillance and converts neighborhood governance into an intelligence network. Personal identity, residence, communication, and religious practice become objects of continuous monitoring by the state. This erodes interpersonal trust and encourages self-censorship even in private settings.

6.3 Regulating Personal Appearance

Authoritarian governments frequently regulate political behavior. Taliban governance extends regulation to personal appearance.

One of the earliest on [28 March 2022](#) concerned male civil servants and the male government employees were ordered to grow beards or risk dismissal.

Later, monitoring reports assessed compliance with beard regulations among health workers. On 25 January 2023 the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice expressed concern that only five percent of health workers complied with hijab and beard requirements.

Women became subject to even more intrusive appearance regulations. For instance, on 19 May 2022, Female television presenters ordered to cover their faces.

29 August 2022 – Female university students ordered to cover their faces during classes.

October 2023 – Authorities in Kandahar informed schools and women's madrasas that only the burqa would be accepted as proper hijab.

These regulations do not merely prescribe clothing. They diminish individual autonomy over one's own body and identity, replacing personal choice with state-imposed conformity.

Recent reports from several provinces—including Kabul and Herat—suggest that Taliban authorities have increasingly detained young men because of hairstyles, clothing, or perceived non-compliance with appearance regulations. Although these incidents fall outside the chronology used in this report, they indicate a continuation of the broader pattern documented between 2021 and 2026.

6.4 Controlling Communication and Digital Space

Privacy increasingly depends upon secure communication. However, Taliban authorities have progressively restricted both digital technology and communication practices. For instance, on [22 April 2022](#) The Taliban banned TikTok and PUBG, arguing that these platforms misled Afghan youth. Further [on October 2023](#) Government offices, hospitals and educational institutions in Helmand and Paktia were instructed to prohibit the use of smartphones by employees during work. Violations could result in dismissal.

[On September 2023](#) Women in Helmand were warned against using Facebook, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and other social media platforms. These warnings were disseminated through mosques on behalf of provincial authorities.

Thus, communication technologies increasingly became objects of state regulation rather than instruments of individual freedom. On the other hand, digital restrictions are particularly significant because they reduce opportunities for education, independent journalism, business, civic participation, and communication with the outside world.

7. Family Life under State Surveillance

International human rights law recognizes the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society. Yet, Taliban governance increasingly regulates family relationships themselves.

7.1 Freedom of Movement

Restrictions on women's freedom of movement became one of the earliest hallmarks of Taliban rule. [on 26 December 2021](#), the Taliban prohibited women from travelling more than 72 kilometers without a *mahram* (male guardian) and instructed drivers not to transport women who failed to comply. These restrictions were progressively expanded to prevent women from using public transport alone, travelling abroad without a male guardian, and entering restaurants in several provinces unaccompanied. Collectively, these measures severely restricted women's mobility and significantly limited their ability to participate independently in economic, educational, and public life.

7.2 Regulating Weddings and Family Ceremonies

The Taliban progressively expanded their control over private and family life by regulating cultural and social traditions. [In March 2023](#), religious authorities instructed the public not to celebrate Nowruz, Christmas, birthdays, International Women's Day, Valentine's Day, and other cultural events, deeming them incompatible with their interpretation of Sharia. Restrictions were later extended to wedding ceremonies, including bans on mixed-gender participation, filming, and certain customary practices. [By June 2023](#), authorities had also prohibited singing, dancing, and clapping during wedding processions, threatening punishment for both women and their male guardians. These measures illustrate the Taliban's increasing intervention in intimate family life and cultural practices, extending state control beyond the public sphere into private social life.

7.3 Healthcare Decisions

The Taliban also imposed extensive restrictions on access to healthcare, undermining women's privacy and autonomy in making personal medical decisions. Women were prohibited from entering health centres without a *mahram* (male guardian), medical centres run by female doctors were closed after treating male patients, and pharmacies were verbally instructed not to sell contraceptives because they were considered contrary to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. These measures directly interfered with women's reproductive autonomy, access to healthcare, and the confidentiality of medical treatment.

8. Education, Knowledge and Personal Development

Education is not merely a social service but a fundamental precondition for personal autonomy and human dignity. From September 2021 onwards, the Taliban progressively dismantled educational opportunities for girls and women. Among the most significant measures were the ban on girls attending secondary schools on 12 September 2021 and the suspension of female students from universities on 20 December 2022. These restrictions were later expanded to prohibit girls from attending private educational courses beyond Grade Six and to close community-based education programmes supported by international organizations. By systematically denying access to education, the Taliban undermined not only the right to education but also equality, economic opportunity, and meaningful participation in public life. More recent reports that Taliban authorities have raided private homes where girls were receiving informal education further illustrate the continuing expansion of state control into the private sphere.

The restrictions discussed above demonstrate that Taliban governance increasingly regulates ordinary life through surveillance, ideological conformity, and intervention in private relationships. Consistent with their ideological vision, the Taliban seek to shape and raise women and men according to their own prescribed social, moral, and religious norms. Yet these measures cannot be understood in isolation. They are reinforced by the dismantling of legal institutions, the replacement of independent justice with executive control, and the use of public punishment to enforce obedience.

9. The Collapse of the Rule of Law and the Justice System

The rule of law is a cornerstone of every society that seeks to protect human dignity and fundamental rights. It requires that government authority be exercised according to publicly known laws, that all persons are equal before the law, that independent institutions administer justice, and that individuals have access to effective remedies against abuses of power.

Afghanistan's justice system before August 2021 faced significant shortcomings, including corruption, limited institutional capacity, and unequal access to justice. Nevertheless, during the period of the Islamic Republic (2001–2021), Afghanistan possessed institutions that formally sought to uphold constitutional rights, including an independent judiciary, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), the Afghan Independent Bar Association (AIBA), the Attorney General's Office (AGO), and an expanding legal profession. These institutions, despite their limitations, provided mechanisms for legal accountability and protection against arbitrary state action.

Since August 2021, the Taliban have progressively dismantled many of these institutions and replaced them with structures primarily designed to implement decrees issued by the de facto authorities rather than to safeguard individual rights.

9.1 Dismantling Independent Legal Institutions

The Taliban rapidly dismantled Afghanistan's independent legal and accountability institutions, consolidating executive control over the justice system. [On 23 November 2021](#), they dissolved the Afghan Independent Bar Association, ending the institutional independence of the legal profession and weakening access to independent legal representation. This was followed on 16 May 2022 by the abolition of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), eliminating the country's principal human rights monitoring body. The process continued [on 17 July 2023, when the Attorney General's Office was abolished](#) and replaced by a new body responsible for enforcing Taliban decrees rather than independently investigating criminal cases. Together, these measures dismantled key mechanisms of legal oversight and accountability, replacing them with institutions subordinated to executive authority.

9.2 Justice as an Instrument of Ideological Control

Under Taliban rule, the justice system increasingly functions as an instrument for enforcing ideological conformity rather than protecting individuals from arbitrary power. This shift is reflected in policies requiring government employees to demonstrate religious compliance. From [September 2022](#), civil servants were required to attend daily religious instruction organized by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and pass examinations to retain their employment. These requirements were expanded [in January 2023](#), when employees of the former Attorney General's Office were ordered to undergo written examinations on religious knowledge and attend daily Islamic lectures. Together, these measures subordinate professional qualifications and institutional independence to ideological loyalty.

9.3 Public Punishment and Fear

The restoration of public corporal punishment provides one of the clearest illustrations of the Taliban's transformation of the justice system. Following the Supreme Leader's order on [14 November 2022 to reinstate Hudud and Qisas punishments](#), public floggings and executions rapidly resumed across the country. The chronology documents, among other incidents, the public flogging of nineteen people, including nine women, on [11 November 2022](#), and the first public execution on 7 December 2022 in Farah, attended by senior Taliban officials. Throughout 2023 and 2024, dozens of additional public floggings were carried out against women and men accused of theft, adultery, and other alleged "moral crimes." These punishments serve not only as criminal sanctions but also as instruments of intimidation, public humiliation, and ideological control.

10. Structural Consequences for Afghanistan

The cumulative impact of these measures extends far beyond individual victims. Together, they reshape Afghan society in ways that will continue to affect governance, economic development, and social cohesion for years to come.

10.1. The Erosion of Human Dignity

The chronology of Taliban's decrees and operations demonstrates a steady expansion of state control over personal autonomy. The Taliban intervention has extended into family life through restrictions on healthcare, weddings, and cultural traditions. The cumulative effect is the erosion of human dignity, as individuals are no longer treated as autonomous rights holders but as subjects expected to conform to state-defined moral and religious norms. Thus, Taliban progressively blurred the boundary between public authority and private life. [Reports of raids](#) on homes where girls receive informal education or women engage in economic activities further suggest the continuing expansion of state control into private spaces, normalizing surveillance and fear within communities.

10.2. Weakening Human Capital and Economic Consequences

The exclusion of women and girls from education, restrictions on employment, and limitations on independent civil society significantly reduce Afghanistan's human capital.

Education is central to economic growth, innovation, and social mobility. The closure of secondary schools, universities, community-based education programmes, and restrictions on professional training diminish future opportunities for millions of Afghans.

At the institutional level, Taliban policies have reversed much of the progress achieved between 2001 and 2021, when Afghanistan invested heavily in strengthening the judiciary, legal education, civil society, universities, independent media, and human rights institutions. The dismantling of these institutions represents not merely administrative change but the erosion of two decades of state-building efforts, weakening the country's capacity for recovery, accountability, and future governance. Once lost, institutional trust is exceptionally difficult to rebuild.

Recommendations

To the Taliban de facto authorities

- Immediately cease arbitrary interference with private homes, family life, and personal communications.
- End arrests and harassment based solely on appearance, clothing, hairstyles, or peaceful conduct.
- Restore access to education for girls and women at all levels.
- Remove restrictions preventing women from employment, movement, and participation in public life.
- Reinstate independent legal institutions capable of protecting citizens' rights.
- End public corporal punishment and ensure all judicial proceedings comply with international fair trial standards.
- Respect Afghanistan's obligations under the ICCPR, ICESCR, CRC, CAT, and other international human rights treaties.

To the United Nations

The United Nations should recognize that the systematic erosion of human dignity, privacy, and the rule of law in Afghanistan is not merely a series of isolated human rights violations but part of a broader governance model that has institutionalized discrimination, surveillance, and repression. In response, the United Nations should:

- Operationalize the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Afghanistan and ensure the rapid establishment, adequate funding, and full operationalization of the independent investigative mechanism mandated by the Human Rights Council.
- Continue systematic monitoring of violations of human dignity, privacy, and personal autonomy alongside documentation of gender persecution.
- Expand reporting on arbitrary surveillance, interference with family life, and restrictions affecting both women and men.
- Strengthen support for the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and relevant accountability mechanisms.
- Ensure that attacks on privacy and dignity are recognized as structural human rights concerns in future UN reporting.

To States and the International Community

- Maintain principled engagement with Afghanistan grounded in measurable human rights benchmarks.
- Continue supporting documentation initiatives led by Afghan civil society and human rights defenders.
- Increase protection pathways for judges, lawyers, journalists, academics, women human rights defenders, and civil society leaders at risk.
- Support international accountability efforts addressing serious human rights violations committed since August 2021.

To Afghan Civil Society

- Continue documenting violations affecting both women and men, including restrictions on privacy, family life, and personal autonomy.
- Preserve documentary evidence, witness testimonies, photographs, and administrative orders in secure digital archives.
- Expand cooperation between women's organizations, legal professionals, journalists, and community groups to strengthen evidence collection and advocacy.
- Raise awareness that human dignity, privacy, and equality are universal rights recognized under both international law and Afghanistan's international obligations.

Conclusion

Five years after the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan has experienced more than a political transition. It has witnessed the emergence of a governance model that extends state authority into nearly every dimension of private and public life.

The hundreds of decrees, directives, verbal orders, and documented practices examined in this report reveal a consistent pattern. Restrictions on education, employment, movement, communication, family life, healthcare, culture, and personal appearance are not isolated measures. Taken together, they form a comprehensive system of social control that undermines human dignity, weakens privacy, and erodes the rule of law.

The dismantling of independent legal institutions, the expansion of surveillance, and the public enforcement of ideological conformity have weakened the foundations of justice and social trust. These developments carry profound consequences not only for individual rights but also for Afghanistan's long-term prospects for recovery, inclusive governance, and sustainable peace.

Protecting human dignity and the private sphere is therefore not a secondary human rights concern. It is fundamental to rebuilding a society in which individuals can participate freely, institutions operate independently, and citizens enjoy equal protection under the law.

The international community, Afghan civil society, and all actors engaged with Afghanistan should recognize that restoring dignity, protecting privacy, and rebuilding the rule of law are indispensable components of any durable strategy for justice, accountability, and the country's future.