afghanistan

PERSECUTION 101



afghanistan

PERSECUTION 101

Recently victorious over the United States and its allies, Afghanistan's i government arbitrarily enforces an extreme interpretation of Sharia law

Religious minority communities in Afghanistan face layer upon layer of violence and discrimination for their identities. From the Taliban to Islamic State to their communities, the pressure to follow the majority's interpretation of Islam—about 85-90% of Afghans are Sunni Muslim—is unrelenting. A land of many ethnic minorities, religious and ethnic identity often overlap, compounding the difficulties face by many and rendering the free practice of their faith in Afghanistan utterly impossible.



QUICK FACTS

Type of Government
Theocracy

Head of State
Hibatullah Akhundzada as the Amir-ul Momineen

Total Population
Approx. 39.12 million
(2023 estimate)

Religious Demography
99.7% Muslim - 39.11 mil
0.3% Other - 120,000

Ethnic Demography

40% Pashtun
25% Tajik
10% Hazara
7% Uzbek
18% Other



TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Government Restrictions

The Taliban enforces, albeit haphazardly, an extremist interpretation of Islam that includes imprisonment, torture, and even death for violations of Sharia law.

Militant Terrorism

Fighters associated with Islamic State are known to commit acts of senseless violence in Afghanistan, adding to the cruel insecurity created by Taliban rule.



ICC IN AFGHANISTAN

Conducting relief and development work in Afghanistan is difficult for a host of reasons. Even aside from the Taliban's strident animosity to western and Christian activity in Afghanistan, international sanctions complicate work in the country and a shattered local banking system renders the transfer of funds into the country nearly impossible.

In the months following the 2021 fall of Afghanistan back into Taliban hands, ICC worked strenuously to rescue Afghan Christians from the impending wave of persecution. Though ICC could not address every case, it was able to extract dozens of believers from the country, often over the border into Pakistan. Though they face religious persecution and the threat of expulsion there too, ICC has continued to support these families in their attempts to rebuild their lives.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Afghanistan

When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, it implemented a strict, fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia law that left little room for political opposition or the rights of women and religious minorities. The Taliban was merciless in its extremist viewpoints and became a hotbed of radicalism dangerous not only to its own people but to the entire world.

In late 2001, after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the U.S. led a coalition that ousted the Taliban from power and backed a new government, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, based on democracy and human rights. Though it faced many challenges, this new government succeeded in delivering unprecedented rights to the Afghan people.

Women benefited enormously, with women and girls quickly taking advantage of the increased access to education and filling schools and universities across the country. Religious minorities, likewise, enjoyed far greater access to government services and increased inclusion in society as the Islamic Republic government increased suffrage and implemented rights consistent with democratic norms.

During this time, the Taliban was far from a passive player. But while waging an active military resistance to the democratic government, it promised that were returned to power it would implement a more palatable form of government respectful of the rights being enjoyed across Afghanistan.

The U.S.-backed Islamic Republic government fell in August 2021, two decades after the U.S. toppled the Taliban in the first place. In its place, the Taliban quickly resurrected the extremist regime it had imposed in the 1990s. In the place of rights and democracy, it imposed a radical interpretation of Sharia law, the death penalty, and a systematic reversal of human rights across the country. Again, women and religious minority communities took the brunt of their cruel reign.



In the time since, the United States and its allies have refused to recognize the Taliban government or allow it to represent the country on the international stage.

Upon seizing control of Afghanistan, the Taliban took “expansive measures to bar women and girls from participation in public and political life,” according to the U.S. Department of State, “including restricting their access to education at all levels beyond primary school, employment, and freedom of movement and dress.”

The history of Christianity in Afghanistan means that most Afghan Christians are converts from Islam, rendering them apostates in the eyes of the Taliban and exposing them to death or imprisonment by the Taliban. According to Taliban jurisprudence, beheading is the appropriate penalty for male apostates while women receive life in prison for leaving Islam to another religion. Sharing a faith other than Islam is punishable in like manner.

Religious minority communities in Afghanistan face crushing opposition from the Taliban, but the challenges they face do not end there. Largely cut off from international aid, they are also subject to terrorist attacks at the hands of Islamic State and ostracized in a society with no place for religious dissent. Few options exist for Afghan Christians or members of other communities, like the Bahai and ethnic Hazara. With fleeing not an option in many cases—and the destinations dangerous in and of themselves—many are forced to live in hiding, hoping for an end to Taliban rule and the cruel repression that it has brought.

Resources and Reports

Afghanistan Humanitarian Brief

State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom — Afghanistan Chapter

USCIRF 2023 Annual Report — Afghanistan Chapter



PERSECUTION.ORG
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN