
Between Silence and Resistance: A Fragmented Response of Afghan Civil Society Towards the Taliban's Second Emirate

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Abstract

The return of Taliban's second emirate into power, on 15 August 2021, marked a decisive authoritarian reversal in Afghanistan. Following the withdrawal of international forces, the Taliban rapidly consolidated control over state institutions. This transition fundamentally reconfigured the working space for Afghan civil society. The purpose of this research is to analyze the responses of the Afghan civil society toward the Taliban regime, with a specific focus on their policies towards education, women's rights, and governance. In doing so, it also addresses the conceptual gap in west-centric understandings of Afghan civil society by highlighting Afghan civil society internal fragmentation and adaptive political strategies. Utilizing information from 17 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with the civil society actors in Afghanistan and Pakistan, we came across three kinds of responses which can be categorized as *strategic silence*, *vocal support*, and *vocal opposition*. While many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the Taliban's policies, the dominant response was strategic silence, which is a calculated response shaped by security risk, surveillance, and the erosion of organizational networks. The study conceptualizes strategic silence not as apathy, but as an adaptive political strategy under authoritarian consolidation. The study suggests that without an inclusive Afghan government, international recognition, and basic democratic rights, the Taliban regime will always be vulnerable to violence, instability, and eventual decline.

Keywords: Afghan civil society, Taliban regime, Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani Regime

Introduction

The Pak-Afghan region has been facing turbulence, mayhem, and chaotic conditions for the last four decades. The outcome has always been catastrophic for the entire region. Whereas, some scholars described it as the New Great Game (Kim & Indeo, 2013), others call it a war against terror (Cohrs et al., 2003) and a struggle for power (Naz & Jaspal, 2018). According to estimates, 223,000 people have lost their lives in the region between 2001-2019 (Neta C. & Catherine, 2022). The chaotic situation in both countries is always fraught with civil war. Data on refugees and migration shows that approximately 8 million people in the Pak-Afghan region have either immigrated to foreign countries or are internally displaced (Vine et al., 2020).

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Besides expenses incurred by the Afghan people and government as well as other regional countries, the United States alone has spent 2.261 trillion dollars on War on Terror in Afghanistan since 2001 (Vine et al., 2020). The infrastructure and human costs are even greater.

In February 2021, after several rounds of negotiations, the United States and the Afghan Taliban signed a deal in Doha, which aimed to end the two-decades-long violent conflict. However, soon after the peace agreement was finalized, the Taliban escalated their attacks on Afghan security forces. They swiftly captured several provinces, often without any resistance. On August 15, 2021, the Afghan Taliban stunningly seized control of the Ashraf Ghani government, causing widespread chaos and uncertainty throughout the country. In another dramatic move, Ashraf Ghani and former senior Afghan officials and politicians fled the country. The Americans abandoned the country in panic resulting into collapse of the Afghan economy. The national institutions reached the verge of destruction, and the civil society of Afghanistan went in deep shock.

On September 7, 2021, the Afghan Taliban announced their interim government and its cabinet. The 33-member all-male cabinet was mostly selected from the ranks of the Taliban, dominated by Pashtuns. Having unpleasant and horrific memories of the previous Taliban regime instated in 1995, the Afghans were worried about the management of the economy, education, civil and political freedoms. Several civil society groups and women NGOs-initiated protests in the streets of Kabul and northern provinces which were forcefully suppressed by the Taliban authorities. Most of the contentious civil and political leadership took refuge either in the neighboring countries or moved to Europe, the Middle East, North America, and Australia.

Based on UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) reports from 2023–24, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is increasingly defined as a protection crisis, with women and girls facing the most severe impacts of systemic rights erosion. In 2024, approximately 23.7 million people required humanitarian aid, with women-headed households disproportionately affected; nearly 48% of these households reported poor food consumption compared to 39% of those led by men. The crisis is deepened by over 130 restrictive decrees issued by de facto Taliban authorities, including the 2022–23 bans on women working for NGOs and the UN, which has significantly hindered the delivery of aid to vulnerable females. Beyond economic exclusion, the health and education sectors are also under extreme strain. Furthermore, the lack of female aid workers and required male chaperones (mahrams) for travel has abstracted women's access to life-saving services, including maternal care and gender-based violence support (OCHA, 2025).

For achieving a stable political order and a sustainable economic growth, the contribution and input of Afghan civil society is pivotal. This requires that an inclusive consultative plan should be made and then it should be practically put to work. A workable, legitimate, and sustainable peace process in Afghanistan needs the participation of the Afghan civil society. Any agreement signed without proper representation of the Afghan civil society is doomed to fail because peace treaties built on a national consensus need the participation and ownership of the civil society (Schirch, 2011).

Our main objective in this paper is to find out about the responses of Afghan civil society towards the Taliban regime's policies of women's rights, education, and style of governance. To achieve this aim, research questions are asked about the response of Afghan civil society towards the Taliban regimes' policies of women rights, education, and style of governance. And the ways the Taliban actions shaped governance, education, and women's rights? Using a qualitative method of data collection and a thematic method of analysis, this paper is organized in the following sections. The section that follows introduces the landscape of Afghan civil society which is followed by our research methodology. Major themes found in the data are discussed in the next section. The study is concluded with a conclusion section.

The Discourse of Civil Society in Afghanistan

Civil society is a contested term and different definitions are in vogue in the western academic tradition (Jailobaeva, 2007). Our conceptualization of the term is rooted in the liberal peace paradigm. Richmond distinguished four key components within the liberal peace agenda. These are the 'victor's peace', the 'institutional peace', the 'constitutional peace', and the 'civil peace' (Richmond, 2006). Civil peace involves the direct participation of citizens and mobilization of the public to defend basic values, human rights, and democratic rights. Moreover, the role of civil society came into the limelight, in the context of liberal theories, after the world observed the 'Third Wave' of democratization, especially in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union satellite states. Important contributions were made by civil society organizations like the theocracy, trade unions, and social movements in defeating the authoritarian regimes (Huntington, 1991). Hence, our understanding of the civil society is premised on the concept of "civil peace" under the broader liberal approach. Therefore, we will take civil society as a network of associations or citizens that defend democratic space between the state and the society through awareness and promotion of citizens, rights, and the accountability of the government as established by (Cooper, 2018).

Civil society as an idea and practice in the Afghan context has evolved through a dynamic process and changed throughout the diverse phases of the country's history (Ali, 2009). Historically, civil society in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Afghanistan mostly consisted of religious clergy, traditional tribal structures, and local community networks (Nawid, 1997). The civil society in Afghanistan was, however, not developed as we understand in the modern sense of the term. Although the existing form of civil society did play an important role in the domestic politics and foreign policy of Afghanistan; yet the clergy in that period was mainly swayed by the progressive policy of the rulers of that time (Nawid, 1997) (Kanishka et al., 2007). Traditionally, Afghanistan has lack of a vibrant and dynamic civil society, neither they have a clear sense of defining one (Winter, 2010). In the mid-20th century, civil society was evolved, owing to the global political change, with the urban middle class such as the educated youth, professionals, politicians, and secular intelligentsia were influencing the government (Ali, 2009). It has been studied extensively that the civil society actors and organizations were heavily funded and sponsored by their respective client states outside the country (Nemat & Werner, n.d.). In the post-2001 era, the very notion, existence, emergence, and active role of the Afghan civil society came in the limelight. The international NGOs sponsored local civil society organizations to promote democratic values and to make the government accountable (ROY, 2005). However, during this time, the religious and conservative sections of society remained in dormancy or were neglected in the mainstream discussions (Kanishka et al., 2007)ⁱ. Yet, their absence in media and public discourse did not impact their presence from Afghan social life specifically the rural Afghanistan. Hence, the Afghan civil society can be conceptualized in terms of internal and external dynamics that shape the civil society. The external dynamics include sponsorship and patronage of the West and NGOs and IGOs. While the internal dynamics include the type of regime, religious and tribal ethnic and family connections (Ali, 2009).

Post-2001, the most important sections of Afghan civil society who championed civil and democratic rights of the public and holds the government accountable have mostly a background in social activism, journalism, and academia (Howell & Lind, 2009), (Borchgrevink, 2010). Therefore, we chose social activists, journalists and those working in academia as respondents because they are the most vocal voices against brutal policies of the Taliban regime. Due to protracted conflict most of the Afghan led the life of refugees that exposed them to the civil societies in other parts of the world, which have also been shaping the contours of civil society in Afghanistan (Ali, 2009). Post-Ashraf Ghani, most of the Afghan civil society members fled Afghanistan to the neighboring as well as developed countries. We also contacted those civil society members who are making awareness of civil rights, while being in migrants.

A central conceptual gap in existing scholarship on Afghanistan concerns the narrow and often

normative framing of civil society through a liberal peace lens. Much of the post-2001 literature implicitly equated civil society with donor-funded NGOs, rights-based advocacy groups, and urban professional networks, thereby privileging a liberal-democratic associational model closely aligned with international state-building agendas. Drawing on the liberal peace framework articulated by Oliver P. Richmond, civil society has frequently been understood as a vehicle for “civil peace,” democratization, and accountability. However, such a reading insufficiently captures the plurality of associational life in Afghanistan, where religious networks, madrasa-based communities, tribal jirgas, and informal patronage structures have historically constituted parallel spheres of collective organization and moral authority. In this sense, a Gramscian perspective, associated with Antonio Gramsci, helps reconceptualize civil society not merely as a liberal-democratic intermediary, but as a contested terrain of hegemony in which competing ideological projects struggle for legitimacy (Bobbio, 1979). Similarly, postcolonial critiques advanced by Partha Chatterjee caution against universalizing Western civil society models in contexts where political society and informal governance structures often mediate state–society relations (Bhattacharyya, 2022). The Taliban’s return to power thus exposes the analytical limitations of NGO-centric definitions and necessitates a broader conceptualization that accommodates religious civil society, diasporic activism, and what may be termed adaptive or “strategic silence” under authoritarian constraint. By addressing this gap, the present study advances a more contextually grounded understanding of Afghan civil society responses to the current regime style of governance.

We examined the civil society response about Taliban policies of education, women rights and style of governance because they have worse record in these spheres that concerned the civil society at most (Amiri & Jackson, 2021), (Alvi-Aziz, 2008) (Ghasemi, 1998). After the Taliban took over the Kabul, the educational policies abruptly changed. The regime has banned girls’ access to secondary education of girls, stopped the salaries of university teachers and imposed certain restrictions on the higher education institutions. The Taliban are particularly brutal towards women as girls are banned to attend colleges and universities. Women are neither allowed to do the government jobs and nor have the permission to go on a long drive without a *mehram* (Their male immediate relative) (Seddiq, 2022) Similarly, they have abolished the Women Rights Ministry and replaced it with the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study as we are seeking to understand the nature of response coming from Afghan civil society to the Taliban regime which came in power in 2021. For this purpose, we first spelt out an exploratory research question and designed a suitable method for data collection and data analysis. As stated above, this research aims to respond to a question about the nature of response coming from the civil society, if any, to the Taliban regime. Specifically, this research intends to understand how the Taliban actions have shaped the governance, education, and women’s rights and what is the response of Afghan civil society in this regard. After rounds of deliberations, we concluded that we need to develop a purposive sampling strategy, conduct open-ended qualitative interviews, carry out a thematic analysis, and then draw conclusions.

Given the nature of work and prevalent security conditions in Afghanistan, we identified a group of Afghan nationals living in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In terms of location, our respondents can be divided into three categories: those who migrated to Pakistan and are residing now in Islamabad and Peshawar; those who opted to stay in Afghanistan, and those who keep traveling between Pakistan and Afghanistan due to expiry of their visa/residence permits issued by the Government of Pakistan. We drew a purposive list of 17 social activists, former active members of civil society organizations, and local change agents. Unfortunately, we could have access to only two female respondents as compared to 15 male respondents, due to traditional social structure of Afghanistan and cross-border dynamics. We conducted in-person

interviews with the first and third categories, whereas respondents in the second category were interviewed via WhatsApp, zoom meeting, and emails. In the next step, we designed an interview schedule consisting of several open-ended questions which has the advantage of giving space to respondents to express their experiences and share their worldviews. The interviews were audio recorded in Pashto language, transcribed into English, and utilized for thematic analysis. After having thorough reading of the interviews text, we consulted the respondents again for some gaps in our understanding. We strictly adhered to ethical protocols involving informed consent, no harm, and confidentiality and privacy. Therefore, we are not including the names and locations of the respondents in this paper. We have maintained a list of the respondents, their occupation, and details of current location and social engagements but these details cannot be shared in this paper for obvious reasons of security threats to their lives.

Thematic Analysis

We went through the interview transcripts, first individually, and then discussed our interpretations in a meeting. After several rounds of close interaction and deliberations, we reached to a shared understanding and interpretation of the data which provided basis for the themes discussed in the following session. Overall, we found three themes that define the nature of respondents' reaction of Taliban regime and their mode of resistance to it. These include strategic silence, vocal support, and vocal opposition.

Strategic Silence

Majority of respondents fall in this category. They are thoroughly discontent with the Taliban regime and its governance model and performance; however, they prefer to remain silent as a strategy. By strategic silence, we refer to the obvious existence of fear and security threat to the social activists in the sample and beyond. However, it also emerged that their silence is forever, and they are waiting for the right moment to challenge the Taliban regime in future. Majority of social and civil society activists falling in this thematic category are modern educated individuals and have been affiliated with academia and civil society organizations. They are purposively silent observers. They are not satisfied with the Taliban policies and approach to governance, administration of justice, and social services delivery. Some of them are active on social media with pseudonyms. They do not express their actual identity fearing punitive consequences from the Taliban. Recently, the Taliban detained a prominent professor Faizullah Jalal, teaching at Kabul University for criticizing the Taliban in a live debate (News, 2022). Just a month before, another young activist was first detained and then killed by the Taliban authorities for publishing a post which was critical to the Taliban regime. Due to security threats and fearing surveillance, most Afghans are deleting their previous posts over social media. Some of them even deleted their accounts who reside in Afghanistan (BBC, 2021). A social activist, living a refugee life in Peshawar is worried about the Taliban policies, he says,

“We have not done anything practical and remained silent. However, we do participate in arguments in our private circles. Even we cannot protest on social media, we are worried. Our parents stop us from using social media due to the fear of an unwanted incident. Even here in Peshawar, we do not feel safe. Civil society is mostly silent. Taliban use unwarranted violence against those showing some dissent”.

Similarly, a respondent who is a resident of Nangarhar and lecturer at a university in Afghanistan maintains, “We are silent. We can only show our dissent in an environment where confidentiality is guaranteed. We are silent due to security reasons.” However, some of them are silent because they think more time is needed for the stabilization of the system. They are just fed up with wars and conflicts. Simply they need peace. For instance, another respondent who is dean at a university in Afghanistan says,

“We are silent. We are not opposing because the opposition does not give good results previously. We want to solve all these problems through mutual consensus. It will take some time. We want to give them more time”.

This group invested most of their time in getting an education which has no value in Afghanistan under the Taliban. A young activist and a scholar of political science is not happy with the Taliban policies. He is worried about his future. He does not support the Taliban as he says,

“I am one of the members of this society. I spend my 17 years of life gaining knowledge, but they say that everything you achieved is nothing. Modern university education has no value for them. I am one of the victims of their policies. Because of that, I cannot accept them, because my future will be doomed under the Taliban”.

Taliban think that modern education has no value as compared to religious education thought in the seminaries, which means only seminary graduates will be rewarded with jobs. After getting higher education these Afghans have learned about basic rights, they have learnt to criticize, to question, so, they cannot remain silent for a long time. They consider themselves the victims of Taliban policies.

They are of the view that the Taliban have neither a policy nor the capacity to make any plan concerning education, women rights or governance. They think the Taliban have a totalitarian and dictatorial style of governance. For instance, a respondent who has a background of academia maintains that,

“The style of government of the Taliban is totalitarian. Because the authority is with one party that is the Taliban. People have no share in policymaking. They use dictatorial means to impose their orders on the public. Their chief just issues a decree, and the public has to follow it”.

As far as women’s rights are concerned, they even abolished the women’s rights ministry and replaced it with the ministry of virtue and vice, a ministry that strictly implements moral policing. The same respondent criticizes the Taliban as “They claim that they will give women rights according to Islam. However, there is a dichotomy in their definition of Women’s rights and that of the civilized world. They have closed girls’ educational institutions.”

A young student and activist living in Peshawar challenge the Taliban women policy and style of governance from the religious point of view. He thinks the Taliban policy concerning women might be inspired by the traditional Pashtun tribal code but not Islamic teachings. He argues,

“There are some rights given by Islam, but the Taliban don’t recognize them. It includes seeking education, shares in decision making and participation in societal development. Similarly, there is no example of the Taliban style of governance in the civilized world. Their style of governance is neither democratic nor monarchy and not even Islamic. It is more like a mixture of Islamic and tribal Pashtun codes”.

In a nutshell, these respondents are very concerned and worried. They do want to express their dissent for the sake of improvement in the system, but they cannot, due to the threat of use of violence on the part of the Taliban regime. Some of them are silent and waiting for the right moment to speak up. However, they are hopeful that a time will come when people rise due to economic hardships and force the

Taliban to either quit the power or accept the public aspirations.

Vocal Support

Among our sample interviewed, we explored only five have a favorable view of the Taliban regime. This group was willing to provide a vocal support both on the ground and in media to support the Taliban regime. In their view, the Taliban do have a pertinent education policy, women's rights, and also, they have a model of governance. By pertinent policy, they refer to Islam and the Afghan culture. They vehemently support and defend Taliban's policies on social media. They say they will not hesitate to support their policies on the ground if needed. For instance, a respondent who is Taliban propagandist and a social activist says,

“Taliban policy is what traditional Islam gives us under the shariah law. We support it and most of the civil society supports it. Taliban are our heroes because they got us freedom from foreign occupation”.

This group also supports the Taliban's educational policy. They claim that the Taliban did not make major changes to the existing educational policy. They only put it according to the principles of shariah such as inserting Islamic injunctions to the existing policy and segregating the classrooms both for males and females. Another social activist who is a resident of Ghazni, says

“I support and advertise Taliban's educational developments and policies because they are sincere with the Afghan nation and also with religion [Islam]. I support them through my writings. Civil Society will ultimately appreciate Taliban's policies but give them some time to work”.

This group also supports Taliban policy regarding women rights. They argue that the women of Afghanistan enjoy equal rights to their men counterparts. According to this group, there is no violation of women rights in Afghanistan, rather, it is the propaganda of the west and the NGOs which are financially supported by them. Very few people may dislike Taliban policies of segregated education who are living abroad and have no concern with the Afghan society. They claim that Afghan women are happy under the shariah system, and the minor problems will be solved after the stabilization of the Imarat. As a journalist at Kabul News, maintains,

“Taliban have an educational policy which is according to the culture and religion of Afghans under Islamic shariah. The Afghan women are happy. We always support it. The civil society also supports it”.

Majority of the Taliban supporters abhor democracy. They maintain that Afghans love Imarat and hate western democracy. They argue that the previous government was corrupt to the core, and they could not enjoy peace in that era. They support the Taliban regime because they think the Taliban are equally applying the law to both rich and poor. A respondent, who is a social activist claims,

“Taliban have their system and policy of governance which include, Shura council, Qazi ul Qaza (Judiciary) and executing agencies. I support Taliban style of governance because it is based on justice, shariah and equality and the spirit of service to the faithful. So, the Taliban fully enjoy the confidence and support of the Afghan Civil Society”.

As already discussed, Afghanistan has a strong religious civil society which is mostly based in rural areas. This religious civil society provide them a strong base of support. They have previously helped the

Taliban financially and morally in their war against the US coalition and the incumbent Afghan governments. We must accept that we could not reach them effectively, due to different reasons, to record their views regarding the Taliban regime. This group who vocally supports them are mostly uneducated and lived a tough life in the rural pockets. Unfortunately, this group of supporters did not enjoy the fruits of democracy, education, and development. They think the Taliban as their saviors and the real heroes. Ultimately, they support every move by the Taliban and connects their actions with Afghan culture and Islamic Shariah.

Vocal Opposition

Only four of the total respondents are willing to vocally challenge the Taliban government through demonstration of physical protests and social media. For the first time protests were erupted on the removal of the Afghan national flag and replacing it with the Taliban black and white flag. Besides, Afghan women frequently demonstrate protest for women's education and their right to work. Taliban have banned the protests and ordered prior permission from the authorities. Those who violate are suppressed brutally. Media coverage of these protests is also banned. Scores of journalists are detained, beaten up, and wounded for performing their professional duties. Very few people, especially women, dare to protest in the face of brutal consequences. This group mostly include the youth who are educated and have affiliation with some civil society organizations. This group is strongly connected with the networks of civil society through social media. They use WhatsApp and Twitter trends to communicate and showcase their struggle. Respondents in this group are modern educated and very clear about their ideas, goals, and vision about the future of Afghanistan. Some of them were women who were employed in the previous government and had lost their jobs after the arrival of the Taliban. They are very much dissatisfied with the Taliban policies and oppose them on every platform they have access to. In their view, the Taliban have no clear policy of education. For Instance, a female respondent who is resident of Ghazni province and who is also a civil society activist and business studies graduate, expressed her anger in these words,

“They [Taliban] have no clear policy for the education system. Their entire emphasis is just on the hijab for of girls and women. We want our fundamental rights, and we all raised our voices because we want our rights to be restored”.

Activists in this group actively staged protests against Taliban's harsh policies towards women. They asserted their position and refused staying silence, and showed their determination to strive for their basic educational rights. A forty-two-year-old respondent, who is a former journalist from Mazar e Sharif laments that,

“Taliban have destroyed the well-established educational system. They have no policy rather imposing certain orders out of their insecurities and are afraid of the educated lot and unaware of the modern world”.

In their views, the Taliban have no policy for women. They fire hundreds and thousands of women from their jobs. An activist thinks that the Taliban are afraid of women,

“The Taliban do have a policy for women that is suppressing them to the point that they could not rise against their dirty regime. See, they have closed the girls' education, the ministry for women's rights and ordered them to sit at their homes and never come out without male. They are making them a slave to themselves”.

They resolve that they will never keep quiet and hope they will be joined by the rest of the civil society over time. In their opinion, the style of governance of the Taliban is the amalgamation of a totalitarian code and a dictatorial approach. This group wants to acquire their democratic rights of representation and dissent. A young man who is a social activist is of the view that the style of governance is despotic and totalitarian. He maintains “The Taliban feel pride in abusing democracy. They love to give capital punishments publicly. Common people have no rights secured in their regime.” This generation has observed the prosperity of democratic nations. They enjoyed relatively more freedoms in the previous governments. The female respondent who is an activist expressed her resolve,

“I will never keep quiet like most of the girls do of my nation. We will stay here and will continue doing any work we can to take our rights from them. They can never stop us from being educated. We are free and strong enough to stand for our rights”.

As stated, this group is vocal but is a significant minority. Their staunch opposing to Taliban is based on their strong linkages with other social networks working both inside and outside the country. They are educated, and are the prime victim of Taliban policies. Most of the group members have close interaction with the international NGOs and also officials of the former government. They are already well trained for mobilization. However, they are very few because most of their colleagues have already left the country after the fall of Kabul. They aspire that soon the Afghan civil society will rise and accompany them in struggling against the Taliban regime. They hope that collectively, they will be successful in overthrowing the Taliban regime. They expect that civil society will bring down this brutal regime in near future.

Critical analysis

During the fieldwork, we observed that most of the participants were reluctant to disclose their identities. Even those who support the Taliban regime do not want to be revealed due to security reasons. We found them still in shock and in a disbelief, what has happened and passing through extreme uncertainty about the future of their country. We also observed that the people vocally opposing the Taliban regime are those residing in the neighboring countries and in Europe. They are opposing the Taliban regime because they are relatively feeling safe in the neighboring countries. Secondly, they are educated, and they do not see any future in their homeland under the Taliban regime. Also, they were somehow both the creators and product of the previous system. Unfortunately, they are irrelevant in the Taliban regime. A respondent told us informally that most of the civil rights activists have left the country. They were given a special quota for asylum or immigration to the west by the respective agencies, NGOs, and embassies they were working with. The flight of activist created a vacuum in the society and hence we do not observe any organized resistance from the civil society. This is one big reason that despite opposition people could not pose a big challenge to the Taliban regime on the ground. There is no active network or support line on the ground. Even those present on the ground could not make any difference because they have no financial and political support besides the security threats they face. Besides, the technical and financial support extended by INGOs is discontinued after the Taliban takeover. However, the campaign against the government is mostly run by accounts connected to these activists living abroad. These people believe that they will return to their country and take an active part in activism.

On the other hand, we observed that the religious civil society supports the current regime. In this research, it was the second major group that throw their weight in favor of the Taliban regime. As it was discussed at length in the literature review section that Afghanistan has a strong religious civil society but traditionally it was under the influence of the incumbent governments. Under the Taliban regime, it is an important opportunity for the religious civil society to directly engage with the governance and gather

support for the regime. They have strong roots in the society which eventually provide support base to the Taliban regimes through religious sermons and decrees. However, some of the clerics who were a part of the previous government do not support the Taliban regime. Yet, they cannot utter a single word against the Taliban due to the fear of persecution. One of the reasons of supporting the Taliban on the part of the religious society is the nostalgia of the Amarat era under Mulla Muhammad Umar that still persists in their minds. Mulla Umar was, no doubt, a charismatic leader for them. They think that the Taliban rule in 1996 was near to the pious caliphate era. They remind the peace and religious spirit of that time.

The fact that the Taliban govt has very little support from the ranks of Afghan civil society is because they give no representation to the civil society in decision making. They only give a share to influential Talibs who fought for them. The people of Afghanistan have no acquaintance to those who are ruling them now. These new rulers have no public profile of politics or any other services to the nation. Similarly, they are not acceptable to the Afghans because these new rulers have no formal education political awareness, or experience in governance. All they know is the Guns and bullets and use of violence as a means of governance.

Another factor that we observed from the informal discussions with the respondents is that the people of Afghanistan do not trust the Taliban. They think the Taliban are imposed by the neighboring countries, especially Pakistan. Common people do not have a good impression of Pakistan. They think Pakistan is the country that tacitly supported the Taliban to take over Kabul. They don't like the Taliban because they think they are serving the interests of Pakistan at the cost of national interests.

The most vocal group who opposes the Taliban regime is the educated women and the one who worked in different government departments and non-government organizations before the Taliban takeover. They are accompanied by some of their male counterparts who are also enjoying stable jobs in the media and NGOs sector before the arrival of the Taliban. They were the sole bread and butter earners of their families. They have acquired modern education. They are aware of their fundamental human rights. They have exposure to the civilized world that's why they cannot remain silent, even at the cost of their personal security. This group shows an active presence on social media. However, unfortunately, they have very little material support. They are complaining that the international community has abandoned them. Scores of social activists are prosecuted, some are extra-judicially killed. Media coverage of their protests is censored. They address the international community to help them in achieving their fundamental rights.

While conducting this research a drastic difference of opinion was observed among the respondents. In our analysis, it was probably due to diversity in the background of the respondents with respect to their education, ethnic identity, age difference, and priorities. Similarly, it is the initial days of the Taliban regime, things are complex, they don't know what happens next. They are only expressing their worries and hopes based on their experience and aspirations which is very different from each other. One thing, which is common in their responses is that they are shocked at the pace of events taking place and at the same time cautious while expressing their opinion.

The following terms better summarize the Afghan Civil Society's response to the Taliban regime: uncertainty, discontent, silence, and hope. There is uncertainty about the political fate of Afghanistan. The Taliban keep to the public to wait until they frame policies for education, women, and the political system. They claim that it is an interim set up and they will make another government after broader consultation. On the other hand, people are worried due to economic woes, they are concerned about their future. International trade, aid, and finances are frozen. The trained and educated human capital is fleeing the country. The educated lot will barely accept the government based on the power of a gun than knowledge. Civil society is silent. They want to live peacefully. They don't want to endanger their lives. However, they are hopeful that one day they will again have a peaceful, inclusive, and democratic Afghanistan. They hope that the international community will help them in pressing the Taliban regime for an inclusive government respecting the fundamental rights of all.

The post-2021 trajectory of Taliban rule can be analytically understood through the lens of authoritarian consolidation. The case of Taliban regime exhibits minimal institutional pluralism or meaningful electoral contestation. It is more closely related to a non-competitive, ideologically driven authoritarian order with limited political mobilization outside approved religious structures. At the same time, it departs from classical military or single-party authoritarian models by grounding its legitimacy claims in a religious-legal framework, thereby resembling a theocratic-authoritarian hybrid in which clerical authority and executive power are fused.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that Afghan civil society's response to the Taliban's return to power is neither uniform nor predictable. Instead, it can be understood through three broad patterns: strategic silence, vocal support, and vocal opposition. These categories capture the diversity of positions that have emerged since 2021. Some actors openly endorse the regime, often grounding their support in religious or cultural narratives. A smaller but visible group continues to challenge the Taliban publicly, especially around women's rights and education. Yet the largest segment adopts what we describe as *strategic silence*, a deliberate choice shaped by fear, uncertainty, and the absence of protective networks. Far from indicating apathy, this silence reflects a calculated effort to survive, preserve social capital, and wait for more favorable political conditions.

Empirically, the study highlights the fragmentation of Afghan civil society after the collapse of the previous political order and the withdrawal of international support. The once donor-supported urban advocacy networks have weakened, many activists have left the country, and religious constituencies have gained greater public space under the new regime. Conceptually, by framing silence as a political strategy rather than passivity, this research contributes to a better understanding of how civil society operates under authoritarian consolidation.

Looking ahead, Afghanistan's political trajectory is unlikely to follow a simple path of either inevitable collapse or sudden democratization. Three possible directions appear more plausible. One is hard consolidation, where the Taliban further entrench centralized clerical authority and normalize a theocratic-authoritarian order. Another is controlled reform, involving limited policy adjustments, perhaps in education, governance, or international engagement, without altering the regime's fundamental structure. A third pathway is fragmented resistance, marked by dispersed domestic and diasporic activism that continues to contest legitimacy but remains organizationally divided. These scenarios suggest that Afghanistan's future will depend not only on state policies, but also on how different strands of civil society adapt, negotiate, and reposition themselves within an evolving political landscape.

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