

The Taliban's Curricular Attack on Higher Education in Afghanistan: A New Reality for Higher Education in Afghanistan

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Abstract

In two short years, universities in Afghanistan have seen a drastic drop in enrollment due to the Taliban ban on women in higher education and a culture of surveillance and fear. At the same time, however, the Taliban have moved to begin to restructure curricula and universities themselves to impose their own versions of conservative religiosity, in stark contrast with the expansion of universities under the previous government.

When the United States completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, it left the government and the military of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan incapable of resisting the momentum of the Taliban's rapid expansion. Among other things left behind during that collapse was a surprisingly vibrant higher education sector. In the 20 years since the 2001 US invasion, the number of universities, both public and private, expanded rapidly. While the quality of these institutions was uneven, Afghanistan's booming youth population embraced the university system as a means of social mobility, and a growing number of Afghans sought advanced degrees either in the country or abroad. Between 2001 and 2021, the number of students in higher education in Afghanistan increased from 8,000 to 400,000 in 39 public and 128 private institutions. Since then, many of the faculty have fled, international funds that previously supported higher education initiatives have been frozen, many private institutions have closed, and the number of students in both public and private institutions has plummeted.

The international media has largely focused on the Taliban's misogynist bans on women and girls, first from secondary and then from tertiary education. However, interviewing administrators, faculty members, and students, both those who have fled the Taliban and those that have remained in the country, shows that behind the scenes, Taliban authorities have begun the slower, more deliberate process of dismantling much of the work that was done over the past 20 years to grow and standardize the higher education sector. This includes massive revisions to the previous regime's curriculum and replacing it with one that centers on a conservative version of Islam counter to the religious beliefs of many of those in the country, and enforcing this version of religious education in the university primarily through fear and other authoritarian tactics.

A New Curriculum

The Taliban, a political movement that grew out of religious schools in the Afghan and Pakistani borderlands, has always emphasized its own vision of education. It is based on conservative Islamic and Pashtun values, which stand in striking contrast not only with Western approach to education but also with more moderate Islamic modes embraced elsewhere in Afghanistan. This has meant a long tradition of prioritizing male adolescent students, who also served as recruits for the Taliban. Over the past 10 years, as the Taliban steadily expanded the territory that it had under control, new *madrassas* have been built to fulfill their vision of religious learning. Though the Taliban always had supporters in specific universities, particularly in the east of the country, since gaining control over Kabul and the government apparatus of the former regime, it has moved to reshape higher education as well. This includes replacing university officials, instilling fear in students, and forcing the ministry of higher education to revise curricula and transform education. Curriculum changes in particular could reshape Afghan education for future generations.

For instance, courses on human rights, women's studies, and social welfare have all been removed from the social sciences curriculum over the past two years. Departments of philosophy have been replaced with departments of philosophy and faith; furthermore,

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instead of studying different philosophical concepts, students who take courses in this area now focus on criticizing the philosophies that the Taliban considers counter to its ideology. Other changes address course contents directly. For instance, there is now a ban on discussing music or dance as a part of cultural studies. Some changes are more subtle and surprising. For instance, sociology of war was removed from the curriculum, since the Taliban's approach implies focusing on war in the context of violent *jihad* (struggle against disbelief and nonbelievers).

While religious studies were part of the curriculum even under the previous government, the type of religion taught has also shifted significantly. The focus used to be on moderate forms of Islam and Islamic obligations, such as performing good deeds and speaking to nonbelievers about Islam. The Taliban curriculum transmits a far more conservative form of Islam, draws on the work of conservative Islamic scholars, and emphasizes the importance of conducting *jihad*.

Under the previous regime, such revisions would have been conducted internally at the ministry of higher education with the help of academic experts, but nowadays changes also need approval from the ministry for the propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice (locally known as *Amr bil Maroof*). *Amr bil Maroof* is the ministry that was responsible for enforcing the Taliban's moral code during the previous period of the Taliban rule, to the extent of regulating the length of men's beards and veiling requirements for women. This ministry was reinstated by the new Taliban regime and symbolically given the offices of the now defunct ministry of women's affairs. In addition, the faculty of *shariah* law has been brought in to review curriculum changes, and all officials involved are now required to participate in week-long workshops led by the ministry of vice and virtue.

Other changes impact students at all departments. For instance, students are now required to take 24 credits of religious studies—vs. only eight credits in the old times. This has reduced the number of credits for other types of courses.

Enforcement through Fear

The Taliban government has not only restructured the curriculum but also instilled a culture of fear that stifles dissent on university campuses. Faculty and students have told us how Taliban officials at schools had imposed conservative dress codes and harassed students and faculty deemed troublesome. The fact that the ministry of vice and virtue—a body that is often criticized for disregard for individual rights and impunity—is now involved in the work of universities has had a chilling effect, leading students and faculty to self-censorship.

As one male student of economics who wanted to protest the banning of women said, “We couldn’t do anything or protest when they banned women from the university out of fear of being reported.”

Faculty and students also mention fear of being informed on by colleagues or fellow students. A culture of mistrust has been created and thus, as some people report, made real teaching and learning impossible.

Reshaping Afghan Society

This quiet restructuring of university curricula by the Taliban demonstrates the extent to which the current authorities are aiming to reshape Afghan society. They want to create a world where women are invisible outside the home, where no dissent is tolerated, and where academic analysis is replaced by religious beliefs that only a fraction of the Afghan population actually shares. As the generation of Afghans educated in the imperfect yet lively and expanding universities of 2001–2021 is being replaced by a generation that is indoctrinated with authoritarian ideology through fear and mistrust, hope for academic debate and dissent, as well as for human rights, is fading. ▲

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