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Taliban impose 'harsh' limits on Afghans' religious freedom -U.S. panel

By Jonathan Landay

Reuters (23.08.2022) - <https://reut.rs/3TemvRC> - Conditions for religious freedom in Afghanistan have "drastically deteriorated" since the Taliban seized power last year as the last U.S.-led foreign troops pulled out after 20 years of war, a bipartisan U.S. commission said on Tuesday.

The Sunni Muslim extremists' "harsh enforcement" of their hardline version of Islam "violates the freedom of religion or belief" of a wide range of Afghans, said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The congressionally created panel issued its report nine days after the Taliban marked a year since they overran Kabul, returning to power almost two decades after their ouster by the 2001 U.S.-led invasion.

The report noted that the Taliban pledged to protect all ethnic and religious groups.

Yet, it said, "Religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan have drastically deteriorated," with the militants reintroducing "harsh restrictions on all Afghans" based on their hardline interpretation of Islam.

Those negatively affected include religious minorities, Afghans "with differing interpretations of Islam," women, the LGBTQ community and those who follow no faith, the report said.

The Taliban, the report said, are responsible for the deaths of dozens of Hazaras, an ethnic minority that follows Shiite Islam, and failed to protect them from attacks by the regional branch of Islamic State, a Taliban rival.

They re-established a ministry that includes morality police who have targeted women by enforcing a strict code of dress and behavior, including covering their faces, and limited their movement, education, participation in sports and right to work, it said.

The Taliban and Islamic State have both targeted sufis, practitioners of mystical Islam, it said.

"The Taliban's seizure of Afghanistan has led to a rapid decline and near extinction of the already small Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities" and the militants deny "the existence of a Christian community," which must worship in hiding, the report added.

Photo: Afghans pray at a main market in Kabul, October 30, 2009. REUTERS/Bruno Domingos (AFGHANISTAN POLITICS SOCIETY)

Further reading

[USCIRF Releases New Report Highlighting Religious Freedom in Afghanistan](#)

Hazaras: persecution denounced in the Italian Parliament

The Shiite minority is discriminated both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is time for governments that send humanitarian help to ask that it reaches the Hazaras as well.

By Marco Respinti

Bitter Winter (22.06.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3bmbUTj> - After its fifteen minutes of fame, following the hasty withdrawal of US troops decided by President Joe Biden, Afghanistan and its sorrows more or less disappeared from the radar of the media. And this helps explain why the violence of the Taliban against religions other than their version of Sunni Islam continues unchallenged after they returned to power on August 15, 2021.

In the mosaic of Afghan troubles, [the tragedy of the Hazaras, which Bitter Winter constantly covers](#) —occupies of course a prominent place, but most ignore it altogether.

On June 16, 2022, the case of Hazaras case was discussed by the Standing Committee on Human Rights of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian House of Representatives. It was an important step of international interest, because a government was called to action though a special interest body of its legislative assembly.

As is known, Hazaras are Shiites and are not faring well in Afghanistan, where the majority of the population is Sunni. From the mid-17th century, when their history began in the territories that are present-day Afghanistan, Sunnis have been tormenting them. Today, with the Taliban Sunnis again in power, life has become unbearable and the Hazaras experience a daily martyrdom.

In fact, the ultra-fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that is characteristic of the Taliban considers the Shiites to be worse than heretics. For the Taliban, the Shiites are not even Muslims and so, anyone who refuses to "convert"—as the Taliban ask Shiite Muslims to do by becoming Sunni—has to pay a very high price.

In Afghanistan, 397 Hazaras have been killed during attacks under the reign of the Taliban. Of 31 attacks, four are attributable to the Taliban, five to the Afghan branch of the Islamic State (IS-K), and 22 have not been attributed yet.

On June 16 in the Italian Parliament, Mr. Qorbanali Esmaeli, founder and spokesperson of ACAFI, the Cultural Association of Afghans in Italy, and a former political advisor to the Afghan ambassador in Italy, broke the silence on this hidden tragedy.

We ask," Esmaeli told the House Committee, "a parliamentary resolution that may lead to proper research into the Hazara genocide."

Important testimonies were given by Mr. Hussain Rezai, founder and director of the Najiba Foundation, a public library located in one of the poorest areas of Afghanistan, and by Ms. Delkha Fayazi, who fought for the rights of women in Afghanistan and left since the Taliban's return to power, and now lives in Rome.

Amnesty International's Mr. Zaman Sultani and Claudio Concas, a researcher at Università Milano Bicocca and Nove Onlus-Caring Humans added relevant contributions.

But why Italy? Because if it does not want to become irrelevant in international politics, Italy cannot now turn a deaf ear to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is increasingly a crossroads of interests, trafficking, and strategies of global reach, constantly under the pressure of invasive regional players such as Pakistan (where Hazaras are also harassed) and global giants such as Communist China.

"Italy must use all the resources and diplomatic tools it has at its disposal to protect the Hazaras," Mr. Esmaeli says. "Today its Foreign Minister, Mr. Luigi Di Maio, has the historic opportunity to propose himself both as a guarantor and as a spokesperson for the cause of the Hazaras."

Cooperation is a crucial issue, and this is where local becomes global. "The foreign aid to Afghanistan is not distributed equally," the ACAFI spokesperson denounced. "The reports we presented in Rome reveal that the Hazaras do not benefit from it because the Taliban government discriminates against them."

Here is the right lever for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It should start and lead a new international approach to the subject, one that would significantly contribute to the freedom and well-being of the Hazaras.

Photo: *Hazaras in Central Afghanistan.* [Credits.](#)

Kunduz mosque attacked during Friday prayers

BBC (24.04.2022) - <https://bbc.in/3vhYf7q> - A bomb attack on a Sunni mosque in the city of Kunduz in Afghanistan has killed 33 people and injured 43 others, including children, officials say.

The attack on the Mawlawi Sekandar Sufi mosque is the second in as many days in the northern city.

It follows four attacks across Afghanistan on Thursday - all claimed by the Islamic State group (IS).

The Taliban say they have defeated IS but the group remains a key security challenge to Afghanistan's new rulers.

No-one has admitted carrying out Friday's attack in Kunduz, which came as worshippers gathered to pray.

A local shopkeeper told AFP news agency: "The sight at the mosque was horrifying." The explosion was similar to Thursday's bomb which tore through a Shia Muslim mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif, killing at least 31 people and wounding 87.

Thursday's attack in Kunduz killed four people and wounded 18.

Admitting those attacks, IS said it was part of an ongoing global campaign to "avenge" the deaths of its former leader and spokesman.

Bomb attacks in Afghanistan have declined considerably since the Taliban came to power last August following the withdrawal of US and other Western forces after 20 years in the country.

IS does not control any territory in Afghanistan, but since their rivals, the Taliban, took power, they have been carrying out attacks in areas where they previously never had a presence, says the BBC's Secunder Kermani in Pakistan.

Sufism, a mystical order of Islam, has been practised in the region for centuries. Most of the radical Sunni militant groups despise the Sufis, as well as Shia Muslims, as heretics. IS militants also target the Taliban, with whom they have a fierce rivalry.

Responding to the attacks, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid described the perpetrators as "evil elements", adding "serious efforts are being made to arrest and punish them".

The UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan Ramiz Alakbarov said the attacks this week were "a painful reminder of the insecurity and dangers facing the Afghan people daily".

"The indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices, which has already caused more than 100 civilian casualties this week, is unacceptable and must cease immediately," Mr Alakbarov said in a statement on Friday.

Photo: The attack is the second in Kunduz in as many days – AFP

