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Afghanistan's Media Political Economy Under the Taliban De Facto Government

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Abstract

The Taliban's reclaiming of power in 2021 in Afghanistan negatively and profoundly affected media activities in the country. This study, utilizing a political economy approach, critically evaluates the consequences of the Taliban takeover on the media sector. Qualitative analysis of organizational reports, media reports, and existing literature show that the Taliban applied a maximum-pressure approach to control the flow of information and monopolize political narratives. They dismissed the country's media laws and legal frameworks and announced a dozen normative directives that were nonstandard and without country-wide application. These directives are meant to remove women from the country's media ecosystem, censor media content, and intimidate journalists (resulting in a staggering number of violations against them). On the economic front, the Taliban directives caused hundreds of media institutions to close and thousands of journalists to lose jobs. However, the proliferation of cell phones and new media, along with the establishment of media in exile in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, has counterbalanced their restrictions by providing alternative means for people to make their voices heard.

The role of media has been instrumental in Afghanistan's political transformations, especially during the war for independence at the beginning of the twentieth century. The emergence of the first generation of media in Afghanistan in 1911 led to the Declaration of Independence, significantly contributing to public mobilization against foreign aggression (Pamirzad, 2024). Similarly, the press significantly contributed to the advancement and promotion of education, the role of law, and modernism. Furthermore, establishing private media in 1927 extended news diffusion and diversity, fostering political activism (Masomy, 2022). Throughout Afghanistan's media history, there has been a continual confluence between the media and the political system. For instance, a relatively liberal media system in the 1960s led to the emergence of political outlets, such as the Nida-e-Khalq, Parcham, and Shula-e-Jaweed, which contributed to the establishment of the first republican government in 1973 (Pamirzad, 2024). Similarly, the interaction between media

institutions and the political system played a crucial role in the shift from the Soviet-backed communist regime, which lasted for over a decade, from December 1979 to the Mujahideen and later the Taliban in the 1990s (Skuse, 2002).

During 2002, in the aftermath of the Taliban regime, a new semi-liberal media system emerged in tandem with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This era, up to the regime collapse in 2021 and the Taliban reclamation of power, can be regarded as an exemplary period of Afghanistan media history (Masomy, 2022), which will be discussed later. Previous national studies, mainly reports by international organizations, explored the evolution of the new wave of media organizations after 2001. For instance, Altai Consulting reports (2010, 2014, 2017) and Cary (2012) have provided a thorough depiction of the country's media environment, highlighting achievements, opportunities, and challenges. Additionally, the Asia Foundation in its 2018 and 2019 annual reports documented the achievements in the media sector and explored the role of the media in advancing public awareness and shaping behaviors (Akseer et al., 2018, 2019). However, only a small number of academic writers have explored Afghanistan's media (Eide et al., 2019; Hatef and Cooke, 2020; Khalvatgar, 2014, 2019; Masomy, 2022; Osman, 2020; Skuse, 2002). For example, Masomy (2022) provided an overview of the national media landscape following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at the post-Bonn conference in 2001. He highlighted the media's role in defending human rights and promoting equality and justice. The security and economic issues facing Afghanistan's media were also addressed. Wazhma Osman (2020) provided a thorough overview of Afghanistan's media development, particularly television, and highlighted the multiethnic and multiracial influences on media outlets. She also considered the impact of "conditional aid" and the patronage of the US and other donors (who promoted their vested interests) (Boyd-Barrett, 2021: 1486). Further, Hatef and Cooke (2020) critically analyzed the evolution of Afghani independent media after 2001, focusing specifically on the Moby group. Their analysis revealed the connection of this media company with transnational actors. They depicted a complex situation whereby the US supported independent media, including the Moby group, in line with its geopolitical interests and neoliberal ideology.

After the Taliban takeover in 2021, the media landscape in Afghanistan profoundly changed (Afghanistan Journalists Centre [AFJC], 2023a; 2023d; Karimi, 2024), and this has not been sufficiently analyzed. This article examines the intersection of politics, economics, and media under Taliban rule. In so doing, relevant literature is reviewed, and conclusions are drawn.

Literature review

Afghanistan's media landscape post 9/11

In the aftermath of the Taliban's first era in 2001, the global community, particularly the West, led by the US, supported the establishment of a new media system in the country (Altai Consulting, 2010; Masomy, 2022). As a part of state-building and the promotion of democratic values in the country, Western embassies, special missions, and NGOs focused on establishing a private media sector. This initiative involved financial support as well as professional training and technical facilities (Altai Consulting, 2010). The dozens of private media outlets established received grants and support from Western countries or relevant NGOs. Reports show that from 2002 to 2010, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) spent US$43.64 million, establishing media institutions and training journalists. In 2011, it founded Afghanistan's Media Development and Empowerment Project (AMDEP) with a US$22-million fund and US$7 million for news dissemination through cell

phones. Meanwhile, US$183 million was allocated to the U.S. embassy in Kabul for media activities. The US Defense Department allocated US$180 million for information operations in Iraq and Afghanistan alone in 2011 (Altai Consulting, 2010; Cary, 2012). Some of this money was spent on biased reporting and programming in favor of donors (Boyd-Barrett, 2021). For some scholars, this was a propaganda fund rather than media development assistance (Hatef and Cooke, 2020). Although substantial funds were spent on sporadic projects that lacked sustainability, some media organizations such as the Moby group—which received US$2.7 million in aid from USAID in 2010—built a US$20 million business of multiple channels (Altai Consulting, 2010; Cary, 2012). Although such investment can be deemed successful, some scholars noted a pro-donor bias and vested geopolitical motives (Boyd-Barrett, 2021; Hatef and Cooke, 2020). Although the US has been the main contributor of money to the Afghani media industry over this period, other countries and organizations also contributed, as listed below:

- European Commission
- The United Nations and its related agencies
- The UK's Department for International Development
- Japan
- Germany
- Canada
- Italy
- India
- Internews
- Aina and Droit de Parole (France),
- The BBC Service World Trust (now BBC Media Action),
- The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (United Kingdom),
- Media Action International (Switzerland),
- The Baltic Media Center (Denmark).
- The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and UNESCO

This list of the countries and NGOs substantially assisted the growth and development of media in Afghanistan post-9/11 (Altai Consulting, 2010; Cary, 2012), Internews was especially significant. It founded dozens of local and community radio stations in the country; some have become independent businesses, and others are still effective community news channels nationwide. Radio Salaam Watandar, Radio Sharq, and Radio Killid are successful examples of this NGO's contribution to Afghanistan's media industry (Altai Consulting, 2010). Besides funding media institutions, Internews founded the "Nai" as an independent media audit organization conducive to establishing media legal frameworks, defending journalists' rights, and providing media workers with professional training and support (Cary, 2012). Studies in 2010 estimated that Afghanistan's media industry capital was US$75-95 million, with US$30-50 million generated as annual profit; 60% of the industry's revenue came from advertisements (Altai Consulting, 2010). However, the findings of other studies show that hundreds of media outlets were closed due to economic problems after 2014. This indicated the dependence of Afghanistan's media on foreign funds (Masomy, 2022).

Afghanistan media achievements post 9/11

The institutional and professional growth of media in the aftermath of 9/11 is a significant achievement. Studies show that 800 print media organizations were registered with the government in 2012, an astonishing growth compared to 2001, when no regular print media existed under the Taliban (Cary, 2012; Mehran, 2022). Similarly, with over 175 FM radio stations, 75 TV channels, four news agencies, and hundreds of publications, including at least seven daily newspapers, Afghanistan's media landscape differed starkly from 2001. In 2012, 61% of Afghanistan's people had mobile phones, which some used to listen to the radio. People could also transfer funds via personal mobile phones through M-paisa provided by Roshan Telecommunication Company. The country became relatively media-saturated, with big and small cities having between 10-30 TV stations and 20-42 radio stations (Cary, 2012). This figure steadily increased over time. Studies show that by 2018 the number of radio stations had increased to 190 and print outlets to 231, including 26 dailies nationwide. However, some media institutions were shut down due to the worsening security situation and declines in financial support (Eide et al., 2019; Masomy, 2022). Despite security threats to journalists and media workers and economic pressures post-2014, there were 160 TV stations, 311 radio stations, 90 newspapers, and 26 news agencies in 2021 before the Taliban takeover (Afghanistan National Journalists Union [ANJU], 2023). Regarding media accessibility, radio (57.3%) and television (65.9%) were the primary news sources in Afghanistan, while 22% of people got news from the Internet (CDAC Network [CDAC], 2022). Similarly, television, with a 91.1% and 57.3% penetration rate in urban and rural areas, respectively, became the most widely used medium in the country. In 2019, 69.3% of households in Afghanistan reported owning a television set (CDAC, 2022; Akseer et al., 2019).

This media proliferation and penetration contributed to the formation of public opinion, political participation, and the promotion of modern values (Masomy, 2022). People engaged in political activities expressed their opinions and advocated their wishes, and this included protests against the government (which was considered a crime two decades earlier). It also encouraged families to send their daughters to schools (Khalvatgar, 2019). On the freedom of speech index, the country was ahead of its neighbors (Khalvatgar, 2019; Masomy, 2022), and in terms of media law, Afghanistan had one of the most progressive and democratic frameworks in the region (Winterhager, 2024). Similarly, studies show that media was the second most trusted institution in Afghanistan (67.0%), after religious leaders (69.3%), but ahead of government bodies (Akseer et al., 2018).

From a country without television in early 2001, the number of both private commercial and public stations skyrocketed to nearly two hundred in 2021. The Moby group-owned media—which included three television networks (Tolo, Tolo News, and Lemar), two radio stations (Arman and Arakozia), one production company (Kaboora), a magazine (Afghan Scene), and an online streaming app (Darya)—became the leading media organization in the country. Until the government collapse of 2021, the Moby group media remained the country's leading media group in terms of audience numbers (CDAC, 2022). The Tolo network advanced its reputation when it launched its exclusive news channel, Tolo News, in August 2010. Journalistic professionalism, high-quality production, watchdog function, and addressing the country's underlying social and cultural challenges were the factors that brought Tolo News to the forefront of the media sphere in Afghanistan (Altai Consulting, 2010). However, the importance of strong financial support from foreign countries in the popularity and competitiveness of the Tolo network must be acknowledged (Hatef and Cooke, 2020). Similarly, the Ariana network (Ariana TV, Ariana News TV, and Ariana Radio), owned by the Bayat Foundation, plus the Yak, Khurshid, Shamshad, Noor, and Ayna TV stations, had viewers nationwide (Altai Consulting, 2010; CDAC, 2022). Besides television, radio stations such as Arman, Khurshid

and RTA, together with foreign radio broadcasters such as BBC and Radio Azadi, had major audiences (CDAC, 2022; Robinson, 2014). Moreover, elite newspapers such as Hasht-e-Subh and Etilaat-e-Rooz became popular among more educated readers by focusing on human rights and investigative reporting, respectively (CDAC, 2022). With the Taliban takeover in mid-2021, this vibrant sector lost its significant role in society and lost its autonomy in coverage and content production. Most of those committed to professionalism and freedom of speech, fearful of Taliban retaliation or intimidation, fled the country. Those who remained were pressured to conform by Taliban dictates.

Critical analysis of Afghanistan's media political economy post-2021

This article uses secondary academic literature, organizational reports, and media reports to explore the political economy of Afghanistan's media under the Taliban through a qualitative approach. In this context, the following questions are posed:

1. How did the Taliban takeover affect media ownership in Afghanistan?
2. How does the Taliban government politically interfere in the media sector?
3. What are some of the economic challenges the media faces in Afghanistan due to the Taliban returning to power?
4. How do media institutions counterbalance and influence Afghanistan's political and economic system under the Taliban?

The Taliban returns: repercussions for the media

The Taliban reclaimed power in August 2021 after nearly 20 years of fighting foreign forces and the government they supported (Akbari and True, 2022). The Taliban's initial ascent to power ended two decades of relative media freedom in the country. Between 1996 and 2001, this group allowed a handful of irregular publications and backed the Afghanistan National Radio, which was used for Taliban propagation. Other media, such as cinema, music, television, and the internet, were banned as non-Islamic objects (Ahadi, 2017; Mehran, 2022).

However, upon ascending to power, most recently, the Taliban consciously chose not to ban television and the internet (they likely considered the challenges in enforcing such a ban and saw such media as beneficial for governance). Their decision might also have been shaped by socio-technological developments. Afghan society, ruled by the Taliban before 2001, was substantially different then. Although the country is still one of the least literate countries in the world (Pherali and Sahar, 2018), between 2001 and 2021, the literacy rate increased from 15% to 37%. In terms of people's access to modern technology, particularly mass media, studies show that 91% of the urban and 57.3% of the rural population accessed television before the Taliban takeover (CDAC, 2022; Akseer et al., 2019). This medium became integral for most families in the country. Additionally, 9.23 million people (22.9% of the total national population) accessed the internet in 2022. Ninety five percent of internet users were accessing Facebook to get the news (Altai Consulting, 2017; Winterhager, 2024; Zaki et al., 2023). Furthermore, cell phone proliferation gave each individual their own means of filming. Even if television had been shut down, this alone could not have returned the country to its pre-2001 state. The Taliban's proactive adoption of media in the last two decades significantly helped them in the war by contributing to their national narrative and image promotion (Bernatis, 2014; Mehran, 2022). Specifically, the Taliban adopted social media, particularly Twitter, as a means of online warfare, which contributed to their takeover (Courchesne et al., 2022). They

have also created groups in charge of trending their hashtags and promoting their narratives on internet platforms (Atiq, 2021). Therefore, instead of shutting down television and the internet, the Taliban employed a maximum controlling procedure in order to normalize their power, cultivate their image, control the flow of information, and optimally shape national public opinion (Findlay, 2021; Salaam, 2023).

However, the Taliban's return to power inflicted serious damage on Afghanistan's media sector. Between August 2021 and August 2023, reports have shown that the number of media workers in the country substantially dropped by 61.2% from 11,858 to 4,599 people. This led to 84% of female media workers and journalists losing their jobs (ANJU, 2023). In addition, before the Taliban, there were 160 TV stations, 311 radio stations, 90 publications, and 26 news agencies in the country. After their takeover, the number of television stations decreased to 70, radio stations decreased to 211, publications to 11, and news agencies to nine. This sweeping closure of media organizations generated unemployment throughout the country's journalism profession (ANJU, 2023).

Afghanistan's Media Ownership and Control in post-2021

Under Afghanistan's media law during the republican government of 2004-2021, the media could be owned by the government, individual citizens of Afghanistan, private entities, as well as international governmental and non-government organizations (that had obtained licenses from the Ministry of Information and Culture). Additionally, the representatives of foreign media could operate upon receiving an introductory letter from the Ministry of Information and Culture (Mass Media Law, 2009, articles 10 and 50). As a result, the media landscape included a variety of ownership types (Table 1). First, Afghanistan National Radio-television (RTA) and its sub-branches across 34 provinces, combined with publications affiliated with governmental organizations, were owned by the government. A second group of media institutions were owned by private companies or individuals primarily for business purposes. The majority of Afghanistan's media, including hundreds of publications, radio, and television stations in the last two decades, can be categorized in this way. Political parties, politicians, and social and cultural groups owned the country's third media category. The core purpose of these latter media groups was political activism. They advocated and cultivated particular social and cultural values (CDAC, 2022). The fourth media category was international media, which had representatives and offices in the country. During the last two decades, apart from well-known media institutions such as BBC and Voice of America (VOA), many other international and regional media institutions and media-related NGOs have been operating in Afghanistan.

Table 1. The pattern of media ownership and control in Afghanistan under the Taliban after 2021.

Media type		***Owner***	***Controller***
Governmental media	(RTA TV/Radio and all sub-branches across the country)	The government	The Taliban de facto government
Private commercial media	Tolo Network	Moby Group	Taliban
	Ariana Network	Bayat foundation	Taliban
	Yak	Private	Taliban
	Khurshid	Private	Taliban
	Shamshad	Private	Taliban
	Arezo	Private	Taliban
Private political media	Noor	Islamic Jamehat party	Taliban (banned)
	Rah-e-Farda	Islamic Wahdat party	Taliban
	Negah	Afghanistan's people Islamic Wahdat party	Taliban
	Tamadon	Islamic Harakat party	Taliban (banned)
	Barya	Ezb Islami Afghanistan	Taliban (banned)
	Ayeena	Junbish party	Closed
	Mitra	Jamehat Islami parity faction	Closed
International media in Afghanistan	BBC	British government	Banned
	VOA	US Government	Banned
	DW	German government	Banned
	Radio liberty	US Government	Banned

Source: Author-compiled table.

In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, the pattern of media ownership and control markedly shifted. Although the previous legal structures were not altered, the political situation changed radically. Apart from the previous government media, which came under the direct ownership of the Taliban, the rest remained under their original owners while becoming subordinated to the final decision of the Taliban government. These arrangements left the private media under direct control because the original owners had fled the country when the previous government collapsed (Findlay, 2021). Given the high cost of media technology and committed investment over the last two decades, all remaining owners had no choice other than to accept the Taliban's orders. Although most internationally owned media organizations left the country when the previous government collapsed, some maintained their indirect footprint by relaying their programs on local channels. In March 2022, the Taliban banned this group of media broadcasters, including BBC, VOA, and DW (Deutsche Welle), from the local channels in Afghanistan (Ramachandran, 2022). This ended the foreign ownership of national media institutions, particularly by western media. These developments severely damaged media diversity and marginalized competing narratives in the country.

Political influence on media post-2021

Research shows that governments have plenty of options if they want to interfere in media affairs, especially if the government is autocratic (Graham, 2006; Litschka, 2019). Such is also the case if, like the Taliban, it is a rebel government lacking international recognition. The Taliban, after the takeover, dismissed almost every law in the country, except for media law that their spokesperson claimed as still in effect. Based on the AFJC (2023b) report, the Taliban announced at least 21 media directives between their takeover and September 2024, all of which have had broad implications for media freedom and demonstrate the Taliban's full-fledged media control (Table 2).

Table 2. The directives of the Taliban since their take over in 2021.

Directive date	*Norm and policies*
Aug 2021	Working women journalists in national radio television banned.
Sep 2021	Media restricted from covering protests - mainly women's protests.
19 Sep 2021	The 11-article directive or so-called Taliban journalism rules introduced.
25 Sep 2021	Journalists obliged to refer to the Taliban as the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan.
17 Oct 2021	Music broadcasting in all media banned.
Nov 2021	Ban on women's appearance on TV shows, as well as their prohibition within TV series and films.
22 Nov 2021	Media prohibited from conducting interviews with Taliban dissidents and critical analysts.
27 Mar 2022	Prohibition of international media broadcasting through local channels.
26 April 2022	To gain commercial advertising that contains political, social, and security content, media organizations must coordinate with the Taliban government.
21 July 2022	Criticism of Taliban officials' performances prohibited.
31 July 2022	Gender segregation and the prohibition of women interviewing men introduced.
Feb 2023	Prohibition of photography and video interviews (Helmand province).
July 2023	Prohibition of broadcasting women's voices (Helmand Province).
15 Aug 2023	Media organizations ordered not to cooperate with "prohibited media."
9 Dec 2023	Media ordered to avoid the use of foreign terms and expression
18 Feb 2024	Photography of the local official in Kandahar province prohibited.
Feb 2024	Girls' phone calls to media outlets in Khost Province banned.
31 July 2024	The broadcasting of images of all living things banned.
21 September 2024	The live broadcasting of political programmes banned.
21 September 2024	Challenging and criticizing the Taliban's Law and policy in media prohibited.
21 September 2024	Guests on political debates must be chosen from the list approved by the Taliban government.

Source: Author-compiled table based on media reports and AFJC (2023b) records.

These directives show that the Taliban's political interference in media has been significant and incremental, although sometimes not operational, such as in the case of banning images of living things being banned on broadcast media. These directives could be classified as follows: erasure of women from Afghanistan's media ecosystem; full-fledged content control and censorship; enforced tailored self-image promotion; and the maintenance of narrative monopoly (Karimi, 2024; Zaki et al., 2023). Five of the Taliban's media directives are directly associated with the prohibition of women's appearance and activities in the media. These included their complete ban on women working within the Taliban's official media, prohibition of their facial appearance in all media, and restrictions on their voice being aired in some provinces (Aljazeera, 2022; Karimi, 2024).

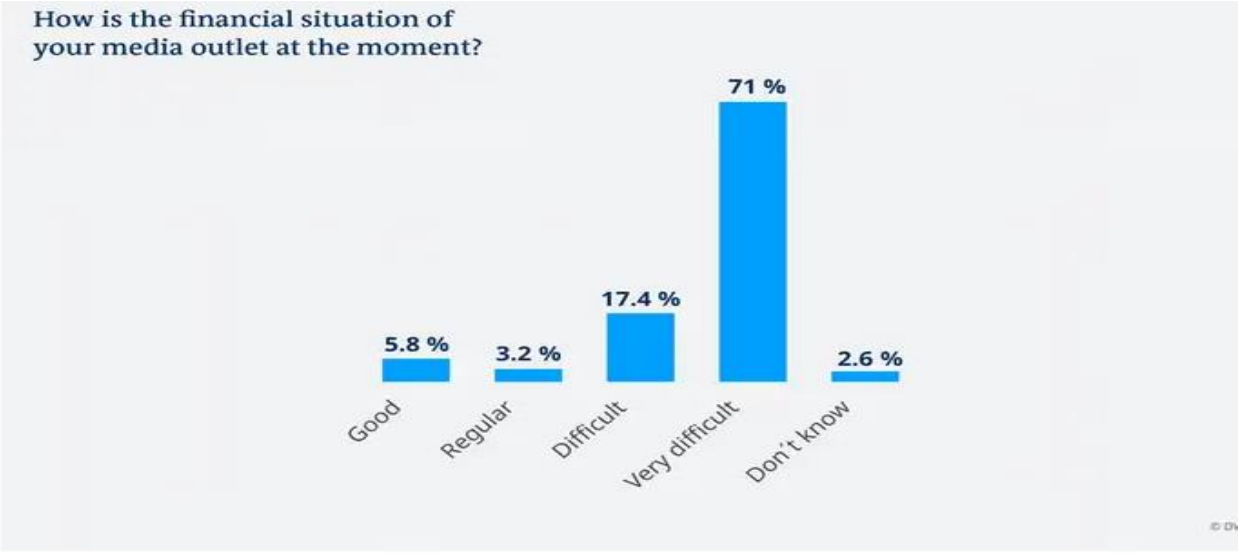
The Taliban's far-reaching restrictions on media content includes all films and television series considered to be against Afghanistan's culture (AFJC, 2023b; Karimi, 2024). This is a vague edict due to the multiethnic features of Afghanistan society. In addition, the Taliban have prohibited coverage of specific topics such as women's rights and girls' education, news and reports about armed and non-armed opposition groups, and of analysts who are critical of the Taliban government

(Watkins, 2022). Furthermore, they ordered the media to stop reporting negatively on the Taliban offices (even to the extent that journalists were denied the right to take photos and record videos of government conferences). Moreover, the Taliban not only forced the media to call them the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan but restricted all non-controllable outlets and dissenting voices, including the international media and national media in exile. The Emirate narrative and tailored image went beyond challenge (AFJC, 2023a; 2023b; Karimi, 2024; Reporters Without Borders [RSF], 2024). Interestingly, these directives also reveal a lack of standardized media policy across the country, indicating that the Taliban's local officials can enforce specific restrictions in various areas and provinces without needing approval from the central government.

Economic implications of the Taliban's media control

International community grants and monetary support post-9/11 were factors in the emergence of resilient media in Afghanistan (CDAC, 2022; Cary, 2012). The Taliban takeover prevented global funding to the media industry in Afghanistan and also imposed huge economic pressure on media institutions (CDAC, 2022). Research shows that before the Taliban government, there was a relatively self-sufficient media ecosystem in the country, which made 60% of its revenue from advertising (Altai Consulting, 2010; Cary, 2012). Most advertisements came from banks, telecommunication companies, the government, as well as the international NGOs and missions in Afghanistan. After the Taliban takeover, the national banking system went to the verge of collapse, a situation that triggered a devastating economic crisis, the influx of refugees into neighboring countries, and the near closure of private banks in Afghanistan. The freezing of Afghanistan's assets significantly exacerbated the economic crisis, particularly in the banking system (Byrd, 2022; Iqbal, 2023). This, in turn, led to the draining of media advertising revenue from commercial banks (CDAC, 2022). A survey by DW Akademie (2022) revealed that most of the Afghanistan media faced serious economic pressure, and the majority were vulnerable to closure. Based on this survey, about 90% of media institutions in Afghanistan described their economic situation as difficult or very difficult (Figure 1). Similarly, approximately 40% of media could not afford to pay their staff salaries (DW Akademie, 2022).

Figure 1



Source: DW Akademie (2022).

According to another survey published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA), within the three months of the Taliban takeover, 231 media outlets (40%) were closed, and 6,400 journalists (60%) lost their jobs primarily due to economic pressure (RSF, 2021). Likewise, the closure of media organizations, as a direct result of the economic crisis, along with the unemployment of journalists and government censorship, constitute the worst consequences of the Taliban's takeover (Norzai, 2022; Vejdani and Kumar, 2023).

Challenges and prospects

Apart from the political, economic, and ownership aspects of the Taliban's media takeover, the human cost of this transformation and the threats made toward journalists require urgent attention. Reports by independent organizations defending and monitoring journalistic activities in Afghanistan paint a dire picture of the journalists' situation (Malik, 2022). The Taliban's new regime brought a new wave of violence, harassment, intimidation, and threats to journalists.

According to the AFJC annual report (2023d), since the Taliban took over, from August 2021 to August 2023, at least 366 journalists' rights violations occurred, including three deaths, 23 cases of injuries, 139 cases of threats, 25 of physical harassment, and 176 journalists' detention.

Table 3 Cases of violence against Journalists, which the AFJC (2023c) and ANJU (2023) have documented

Years	Total violation	Detention	Harassment	Threat	Injuries	Death
2021	187	117	20	45	3	7
2022	260	119	11	128	2	5
2023	168	61		87	19	7

Source: The author elaborated the table based on the AFCJ (2023c) and ANJU (2023) reports.

The figures in Table 3, differentiated by years and violation categories, demonstrate a staggering number of violations against journalists; however, it remains unclear whether these incidents affected a large number of journalists or were repeated against a smaller group over time.

This upheaval showed that the commodification of information in the media could easily lead to the cheap auctioning of journalistic values for capital accumulation. Private pro-democracy outlets such as Moby Group-owned channels were expected by many to defend democratic values and stand by the people's side. This media group had also been one of the main targets of the Taliban violence in Afghanistan over the previous two decades. For example, in a suicide bombing attack by the Taliban on a journalist staff's bus in 2016, seven were killed, and 26 more were wounded (Tolo News, 2016). Nevertheless, after the Taliban takeover, they were among the first to turn their back on the people to become the mouthpiece of the Taliban government (Malik, 2022). This was further revealed by the Tolo News chief editor becoming a member of the Taliban Media Complaints and Rights Violations Commission, which banned the two television stations opposed to the Taliban (Noor and Barya television stations). Other dominant broadcasters, such as Ariana Network, also followed the same path of collaboration. However, there were media such as 8-AM, Etilaat-e-Rooz publications and Pazhwak News Agency, among others, that relocated their activities to foreign countries (Winterhager, 2024) while maintaining their original stance toward the Taliban. It is worth pointing out that relocating television and radio stations would have been much more difficult than for publications and news agencies. Overall, the media owners' decision to save their businesses (O'Donnell, 2022), their foreign donors' influence, the brain drain of professional journalists, and, above all, the Taliban's stringent and coercive media policy contributed to the decline of freedom of speech in the country.

At the same time, ironically, the Moby Group established the Faza and Barbud satellite TV channels abroad to target Afghanistan's audience (Winterhager, 2024) by broadcasting liberal entertainment programs such as television series and music that had been banned inside the country. The same network, at home, advocates for Taliban ideology and broadcasts their propaganda—simply to maximize profit. This example further confirms the media political economy argument that private media ownership, concentration and profits supercede freedom of speech values (Richter and Gräf, 2015; Murdock and Golding, 2016).

Furthermore, the Taliban takeover resulted in millions of refugees (Kumar, 2023), including hundreds of media workers who fled to Western countries (O'Donnell, 2022), particularly Germany, Canada and the US (Winterhager, 2024). This brain drain led to the loss of many professional media workers, affecting media production quality. However, among those who left the country, dozens continued professional international media jobs in their respective resident countries. Some established new media institutions. The 8-AM, Etilaat-e-Rooz, among other publications, despite their portals being domestically shut down, have continued their activities abroad. Moreover, the Afghanistan International and Amo television stations were established by Afghanistan journalists in exile in the UK and the US, respectively. Shortly after being aired, these alternative exile media attracted an enormous number of viewers and became trustful media organizations in Afghanistan (Salaam, 2023; Winterhager, 2024; Zaki et al., 2023). Qiang and Pamirzad's (2024) findings show that the Afghanistan International TV station in exile alone attracted 33.5 % of news viewers within the country. Similarly, BBC Persian satellite television and radio stations were found to be among the most viewed and listened to international media outlets (Qiang and Pamirzad, 2024; Zaki et al., 2023). Moreover, the proliferation of social media among youth and the inability of the Taliban to control the flow of information on social media significantly contributed to the flourishing of citizen

journalism, publishing, and broadcasting of first-hand reports. Cell phones and social media undoubtedly played enormous roles in amplifying the voices of women's protests and other events that would otherwise not have been noticed **(**Tarabay and Najafizada, 2022; Zaki et al., 2023).

If one reflects upon the challenges faced by journalists in Afghanistan, at institutional and individual levels, the future remains uncertain. The domestic media has largely lost its independence and watchdog role to become a propaganda tool for the Taliban (ANJU, 2023). Considering the current situation, the Taliban's propensity toward reverting to their initial autocratic approach—and the absence of a legal framework to safeguard media activities (Winterhager, 2024)—means that change in the media landscape seems unlikely in the near future. The Taliban, who monopolized the traditional domestic media, recently banned the exiled Afghanistan international TV channel (Voice of America [VOA], 2024; RSF, 2024) and announced that Facebook would be filtered in the country (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2024a). The social network attracts over 95% of internet users in Afghanistan (Zaki et al., 2023). However, there are alternative ways to bypass the Taliban's potential crackdown on social media. Firstly, even if the Taliban ban Facebook, people could still gain access through virtual private networks (VPNs)—a method used in other countries that filter out specific domains (Akbarzadeh et al., 2024). Secondly, there are other options such as posting on Twitter (which is known as the Taliban online front) (Courchesne et al., 2022). If the Taliban banned Facebook, many would switch to this or other platforms to make their voices heard. Previous studies have already confirmed an increase in the number of Afghanistan-exiled media followers on Twitter (Winterhager, 2024). The increasing use of Twitter by Afghanistan people has been attributed to its affordance of anonymity, which enables them to defy the regime (Mehran, 2022). Overall, given the accessibility of free VPNs, the Taliban's limited data infrastructures for effective blockage, and the fact that the Taliban themselves are active social media users (which is important for their public diplomacy, image management and promotion), outright bans of these media are unlikely.

Conclusion

The Taliban takeover in 2021 ended the two decades of relative media freedom in Afghanistan. This upheaval, which re-established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan triggered the closure of hundreds of media organizations, caused the brain drain of hundreds of media professionals and profoundly changed Afghanistan's media political economy (Karimi, 2024). As a result, owners of private media institutions—who stood by the US and its allies in the previous two decades—fled the country (Findlay, 2021). As media institutions came under direct control of the new regime, owner investments across the media sector were left behind. The Taliban took control of media outlets and used them for their own ends, while using private assets as a form of ransom (Findlay, 2021). The commercial first-tier media, such as the Tolo network, stood on the side of the Taliban, probably to remain operational and economically viable (Malik, 2022; O'Donnell). Ironically, even the chief editor of Tolo News, the largest TV network affiliated with the Moby Group, became a member of the Taliban Media Complaints and Rights Violations Commission in April 2024. He shut down the Noor and Barya TV stations, claiming that they had breached the Taliban's media rules (CPJ, 2024b).

In 2020, the US government reached an agreement with the Taliban in Doha, leading to the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Many critics argue that this agreement significantly contributed to the collapse of Afghanistan's previous government and the Taliban's return to power since it sidestepped the Afghan government in negotiations (Ibrahimi, 2022; Jones, 2020). Considering this context, it is also possible that the US-funded media calculatedly shifted to the

Taliban side. Thus, the non-governmental media have symbolically remained under their owner's names but become subordinated to the minor and major decisions of the Taliban officials.

The Taliban's political control of the media was extensive. In contrast to the past, instead of shutting down the media, they adopted a maximum-control policy and exploited media outlets for government purposes (Salaam, 2024). The lack of an established comprehensive legal framework to deal with the issue of media and freedom of speech under the Taliban has led to the adoption of a series of non-standard normative directives so far (AFJC, 2023d). As mentioned, these directives concentrated on removing women from the media ecosystem; full-fledged content censorship; promotion of a tailored self-image; and the monopolization of the general media sphere by banning opposing media outlets (Karimi, 2024; Salaam, 2024).

Furthermore, the Taliban takeover exerted significant economic pressure, severely affecting media revenue streams. Before the Taliban rose to power, particularly prior to 2014, studies show that the media had relatively stable revenue, mainly from commercial banks, telecommunication companies, and the government (Cary, 2012). As a result of the Taliban takeover and associated economic pressures, media income shrunk, and media organizations closed (ANJU, 2023; Karimi, 2024). The Taliban also exerted direct influence over the scant advertising revenue by forcing media organizations to coordinate with their government when contracting for commercial rights to publicize social, security and political policy issues (AFJC, 2023b; 2023d). Above all, the media under Taliban control lost their relative autonomy; journalists faced restrictions, and female journalists, who were the backbone of this industry, were severely marginalized.

Nonetheless, the citizen journalists reporting through digital media, combined with Afghanistan's media in exile, have exerted some influence on the Taliban. For example, the news and topics that the Taliban banned from domestic media were easily spread online or were handed to the media in exile. Simultaneously, however, research highlights an increase in the circulation of false information (Winterhager, 2024). Overall, although media in exile combined with citizen journalists have offered informed and insightful criticism of the Taliban and helped to counter the regime's propaganda, their effect in practical terms on Taliban policies remains extremely limited (Tarabay and Najafizada, 2022; Zaki et al., 2023).

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