

MARCH 2022

Taliban reverses its pledge on girls' Education. Afghan girls and families are devastated.



HEART OF ASIA SOCIETY

About HAS

The Heart of Asia Society (HAS) is an independent think tank working towards stability and shared prosperity in Afghanistan and the Heart of Asia region by fostering cooperation that increases connectivity and builds confidence across the region. The Heart of Asia region encompasses Afghanistan and its immediate and extended neighbors from South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

The Heart of Asia Society works through research, dialogue, and policy analysis and remains dedicated to a vision of Afghanistan that safeguards the rights of men and women of all ethnicities and religions, respects and values diversity, and promotes inclusivity and agency for its citizens. HAS also works with partners in Canada, the US, Europe, and the Pacific, urging them to remain engaged and advance peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan and the region.

Front photo: Afghan student in her classroom in Kabul. Kabul, HAS.

The Heart of Asia Society
House 53, Lane 3-Right
Wazir Akbar khan
Kabul, Afghanistan
info@heartofasiasociety.org

&

1 Suite 300, 50 O'Connor Street,
Ottawa, Canada K1P 6L2

Abrupt reversal

On March 21, the Taliban announced that Afghan girls of all ages would be able to attend the new school year. Millions of students and families widely celebrated the announcement. The Afghan school year begins on March 23. Yet, shortly before the full reopening of the school year, the Taliban announced that girls' schools would remain closed until further notice to "comply with Islamic law" and to "finalize things," implying that the group hasn't finalized its "comprehensive" guidelines for girls' education.

After 187 days – seven months of not being able to learn, millions of girls, in line with the Taliban regime's Ministry of Education's previous announcement, rushed to schools on March 23. News reports, photos, and videos on social media and news outlets showed the immense upset that the reversal had caused.

The last-minute reversal was too much for the girls to bear. Shocked, heartbroken, and despaired by the betrayal, the girls returned to their homes in tears. Some went to the streets, demanding their right to education despite real threats of arrests and beatings by the Taliban for violating their protest rules. The decision also left Afghan families worried about their children's future and fundamental right to education. In the following days, the decision also ignited anger and frustration among allies globally.

The Taliban's supreme leader opposes women's education.

A source close to the Taliban told the Heart of Asia Society that the decision to continue the ban on girls' schools and prevent women from getting an education was taken at the leadership's meeting in Kandahar. On March 22, the Taliban's leadership meeting was convened in Kandahar to discuss changes in the cabinet, implementation of the Sharia law, propagation of virtue and prevention of vice, and women's education.

The source also informed that there are stark differences of opinion on women's education among the top Taliban leadership circle. Some leaders call for the immediate reopening of schools and universities to girls. Other Taliban leaders strongly oppose educating women and girls. The source said that "moderate" Taliban leaders' efforts to convince the Taliban leader Mullah Hebatullah Akhundzada has been futile. At the group's leadership meeting in Kandahar, the Taliban leader explicitly opposed the reopening of girls' secondary and high schools.

The source added that the Afghanistan National Ulema Council meeting was planned to discuss and decide on women's right to education under Islamic rulings. Nevertheless, the forum has been postponed several times now for unknown reasons.

Daughter “facing the same fate” under the second Taliban rule.

Afghan parents are worried about their children's education as their daughters were turned away from schools. Nooria, a student's mother, told the Heart of Asia Society, “the Taliban stopped me from learning and going to school in the 1990s, and now my daughter is facing the same fate.” She said, “my daughter cried and had been distressed because she is not allowed to go to school for the past seven months.”

Mirwais, the father of another student said, “our whole family was heartbroken after my daughter wasn't allowed to enter the school.” He added, “with this decision, the Taliban have practically destroyed any hope for a better future in the hearts of Afghan girls and women.” He said that their sons and daughters have “lost the motivation and enthusiasm for studying” and asked, “what future and prosperity should we study for?”

Afghan and global leaders' reactions

This decision by the Taliban regime was met with fierce condemnation from national and international actors. The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed “profound disappointment with the Taliban's decision” and urged them to “uphold their commitments and open schools for girls without further delay.”

Former president Hamid Karzai also expressed his disappointment in the Taliban's failure to reopen girls' schools and said, “the Taliban's interim government should not

allow the implementation of foreigners' agenda who want Afghanistan to be illiterate and needy."

Abdullah Abdullah, former head of the High Council of National Reconciliation (HCNR), wrote that the "closure of girls' schools was against the expectations of the people of Afghanistan."

Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai said that the Taliban did not keep their promise. "They will keep finding excuses to stop girls from learning because they are afraid of educated girls and empowered women," she added.

Rina Amiri, US Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls and Human Rights, wrote that "this decision was made by the Taliban leadership and betrayed Afghan families." Ms. Amiri further added, "there is nothing Islamic about denying girls an education."

In a statement, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken rejected the Taliban's excuses for their decision and warned, "This decision by the Taliban, if it is not swiftly reversed, will profoundly harm the Afghan people, the country's prospects for economic growth, and the Taliban's ambition to improve their relations with the international community."

Likewise, in a press release, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey called upon the Taliban's government "to allow girls of all ages to partake in education inclusively as soon as possible first and foremost for the benefit of the Afghan people..."

Fazel Hadi Wazin, a religious scholar, said, "denying Afghan girls' right to education is in apparent contradiction with the rulings of the Holy Quran and teachings of the Prophet. He expanded that it means nothing but depriving God's servants and innocent children and youth of their human, religious and traditional rights.

According to him, "there is no co-education of boys and girls in Afghanistan's education system; its curriculum is entirely Islamic. The current school uniform for girls is by Islamic and religious standards." Generally, girls' schools are set up in an Islamic manner, and in regards to security, there are no threats to girls going to school.

What does the Taliban leadership want?

In Kabul, the Taliban officials have seldom commented on the recent decision. Even in the press conference of the Ministry of Education on the day of the closure, the spokesperson did not address the issue and did not respond to journalists' questions

on this issue. In the Taliban spokesperson's statement about the Kandahar meeting, there was no mention of girls' schools remaining closed either. Some of the Taliban leaders have said that schools will not reopen until a "sound atmosphere" is created, "full compliance with the Islamic hijab" is ensured, and "changing and adjusting the curriculum according to sharia law" is carried out.

Some political figures of the group believe that preventing girls and women from education has hurt the world's engagement and cooperation with the group and the prospects for their government's recognition. This camp believes that girls' schools must reopen to ensure continued engagement with the world. However, the Taliban regime's Ministry of Education has said that the decision to open girls' schools is beyond their authority.

Several Taliban fighters are disappointed with the flexibility shown by the group's leadership in enforcing the prevention of vice and propagation of virtue; women traveling alone; and women's dress code in the city. Women in Kabul, for instance, wear the same modest clothes as they did under the republic, which appears more "scandalous" and "unacceptable" to some of the Taliban. This camp is also not satisfied with implementing Sharia law in society. Sources close to HAS informed that the decision to continue the curb on women and girls' right to education was made under the pressure of the Taliban fighters who have been disheartened with the overall performance.

According to several observers, the leadership of the Taliban, including the group's supreme leader, Mullah Hebatullah, are principally opposed to women's education, work, and political and social participation in society. The Taliban's political figures in Kabul are trying to hide their leaders' opposition behind excuses such as an "excellent Islamic atmosphere and adherence to the Islamic hijab."

The Taliban imposed strict conditions on university campuses.

Meanwhile, universities have been reopened for female students for the past month. The Taliban imposed strict regulations on universities regarding female students' conduct and dress code. In a meeting with lecturers of Kabul University, the Taliban regime's Minister of Higher Education, Abdul Baqi Haqqani said, "girls' and boys' classes should be segregated." Girls and boys attend classes on two different schedules. In Balkh province, female lecturers teach female students. At Kabul University, however, male professors also teach female students.

A Kabul University professor shared that his schedule got hectic after universities reopened and the segregation policy was applied. He adds that he teaches “male students before noon, and in the afternoon, he teaches women.” Kabul University is facing an acute shortage of lecturers, he added. The segregation policy adds to the workload of the existing lecturers, leaving a negative impact on learning and quality of education. Many intellectual Afghans and university professors left the country due to fears of persecution and economic hardship.

Furthermore, the Taliban has made adhering to the “Islamic hijab” (according to their interpretation) compulsory for female students; women can no longer wear colorful clothes. A Balkh University student told the Heart of Asia society, “on our campus, if a student is not wearing black clothes and is not fully covered, she won’t be allowed to enter the university. The hijab is a full burqa covering the full body; they won’t accept anything else, even long gowns. Yesterday they told me why the hijab was unbuttoned?”

The student also said they had been told that “smartphones and photography are strictly prohibited on campus.” They are also banned from visiting the administration building alone.

A medical student at Nangarhar University said most of her classmates “would not attend classes because the situation is such that no one dares to leave home and go to university and study.” She said that the university’s girls’ section faces a shortage of professors and lecturers. After the republic’s fall in Afghanistan, hundreds of university professors have fled Afghanistan. Although there are no official stats available on the number of professors who have retired, at least ten professors from the newly established Faculty of Public Administration and Policy have left Afghanistan.

A final year male student of the Department of Public Administration and Policy of Kabul University said, “the university environment has completely changed. There is no motivation to study. I come because I am in my final year and want to get my degree.”

After a student posted a picture of the Taliban hanging their clothes to dry on campus, she said that photography had been banned in the classes and on campus. In another episode, the Taliban confiscated a girl’s mobile phone after she was seen taking pictures.

Another student shared that “makeup is strictly prohibited, and female students are forced to wear niqab and completely cover-up. Girls are banned from speaking loudly and laughing.” Many Afghan women generally see the niqab and burka as a foreign culture.

There are reports that girls will also be barred from universities by the end of the semester exams. A male student said, “closing universities again would be a complete tragedy for girls.”

Previously, the Taliban regime’s Minister of Higher Education, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, alleged in a meeting with Kabul University professors that “all the misery in Afghanistan and the country’s 43-year conflict started at this university.” He also stated that “the university lecturers have been promoting western culture and infidelity,” He warned the professors “against possible future actions against the Islamic Emirate.”

The acting Minister warned the faculty that “each of them is being closely monitored by the intelligence directorate and the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.” The stated departments were also assigned to collect information about “each faculty member’s worldviews and personal opinions.”

Analysis

While this report focused on Kabul and a few provinces, it is clear that girls across the country are out of school. The reversal has also revived worries among the Afghan people that the Taliban might keep teenage girls away from education indefinitely, a move reminiscent of the group’s repressive rule from the late 1990s. In addition to keeping the doors closed, several other important questions remain answered. Changes to the curriculum for lower-level education, limitations on subjects being taught, quality and availability of teaching staff, and the dress code are just a few that the Taliban has not addressed yet.

The Taliban's abrupt reversal also highlights a few other critical points:

- Despite concerted efforts from ordinary Afghans of all backgrounds to religious scholars inside the country to scholars and politicians from the Muslim countries and the West, no action and words of encouragement seem to have moved the Taliban’s view on education.
- Taliban leaders also waited until the day of the supposed opening of the schools. The announcement on March 21 might have come before a final decision as it appears the debate on women and girls’ education continued until the last moment of the beginning of the schools. It can be reasoned that the Taliban

leaders were apathetic to the international community's reactions or the feelings of the millions of Afghan girls and their families.

- The Taliban leaders also appear indifferent that the views of their leader are known about women and girls' education and are said to be the reason for the decision to keep schools closed. The group remains unconcerned that it has become a known fact that there is a clear divide within their leadership on the rights of women and girls, something that the international community was conditioning much of its engagement with the Taliban.
- Notably, the Taliban may be using women and girls' education as a bargaining chip against the international community. It could be a strategy by the Taliban to take Afghan girls' education rights hostage for international recognition and other concessions before permitting them to return to their schools.