



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 22, 2022

Taliban Forbids University Education for Afghan Girls, U.S. Slams Decision

SINGAPORE — Afghanistan's Taliban rulers have forbidden university education for women throughout the country, eliciting criticism from the United States and the UN.

Despite international protests and pledging a more lenient rule when they took control of the country in 2021, the Taliban has increased the number of restrictions on all facets of women's lives.

"You all are informed to immediately implement the mentioned order of suspending education of females until further notice," Minister for Higher Education Neda Mohammad Nadeem said in a letter sent to all government and private universities.



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The ministry's spokesman, Ziaullah Hashimi, who published the letter on Twitter, confirmed the order in a text message to Agence France-Presse (AFP).

Washington slammed the decision "in the strongest terms."

"The Taliban cannot expect to be a legitimate member of the international community until they respect the rights of all in Afghanistan. This decision will come with consequences for the Taliban," said Secretary of State Antony Blinken. "No country can thrive when half of its population is held back."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres was "deeply alarmed" by the ban, his spokesman said on Tuesday. "The secretary-general reiterates that the denial of education not only violates the equal rights of women and girls, but will have a devastating impact on the country's future," said Stephane Dujarric.

The prohibition on higher education comes less than three months after thousands of women took university entrance examinations nationwide, with many hoping to select teaching and medicine as future careers when the universities reopen in March, following winter break.

After the seizure of the country by the Taliban, universities were required to enforce new rules such as gender-segregated classrooms and entrances. Only female professors or old men could teach female students.

Journalism student Madina, who wanted only her first name published, tried to grapple with the ramifications of Tuesday's national order.

"I have nothing to say. Not only me but all my friends have no words to express our feelings," the 18-year-old told AFP in Kabul. "Everyone is thinking about the unknown future ahead of them. They buried our dreams."

The country was reverting to "dark days," added medicine student "Rhea" in the capital, who asked that



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her real name not be divulged. “When we were hoping to make progress, they are removing us from society,” the 26-year-old said.

The Taliban adheres to a strict version of Islam, with the movement’s supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada and his inner circle of Afghan clerics being against modern education, especially for girls and women.

However, many officials in Kabul and among the rank and file oppose the latest move by the Taliban, as the former hoped girls would be permitted to continue learning following the takeover. “There are serious differences in the Taliban ranks on girls’ education, and the latest decision will increase these differences,” a Taliban commander based in northwest Pakistan told AFP on condition of anonymity.

In March, the Taliban stopped girls from returning to secondary schools, drastically restricting university intake.

While some Taliban officials claim the secondary education ban is only temporary, they have provided many excuses to prolong the prohibition — from a scarcity of funds to the duration needed to align the syllabus to Islamic lines.

Since the ban, many teenage girls have been married off early — often to much older men of their father’s choosing. Several families interviewed by AFP in November said that, coupled with economic pressure, the school ban meant that guaranteeing their daughters’ future through marriage was better than them sitting idly at home.

Women have also been forced out of many government jobs or are being paid a reduced salary to stay at home. They are also banned from traveling without a male relative; must cover up outside the home, ideally with a burqa; and in November were banned from going to parks, funfairs, gyms, and public baths.

In response, the international community has made the right to education for all women a topic of discussions over aid and acknowledgement of the Taliban regime.

“The international community has not and will not forget Afghan women and girls,” the UN Security Council said in September.

However, Pakistan, Afghanistan’s neighbor, said on Tuesday that engagement with the Taliban was still the best path forward. “I’m disappointed by the decision that was taken today,” Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said on a visit to Washington. However, he continued, “I still think the easiest path to our goal — despite having a lot of setbacks when it comes to women’s education and other things — is through Kabul and through the interim government.”

In the two decades between the Taliban’s reigns, girls were permitted to go to school and women were able to seek jobs in all sectors, though the country remained socially conservative.

In Kabul, where the country’s largest universities are located, female students convened outside campuses, wearing the black cloaks and tight headscarves imposed by the Taliban.

Elsewhere, students sought consolation from friends and family as they came to terms with news of the university ban. “We all felt like caged birds, we hugged each other, screamed, and cried ‘why is this happening to us?’” said Amini, a 23-year-old nursing student in Kunduz.

She was with her three sisters — two already banned from secondary school and another studying for a degree — when social media erupted with the news of the late-night order.



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Facilities across the country were already shut for the winter break, but students had been able to go to campuses for examinations or to study in libraries. In Kandahar, the cradle and spiritual heart of the Taliban movement, male students were able to sit for examinations in classrooms still separated with screens, which until the day before made it possible for women to study.

After the order, however, the university gates shut female students out.

“My sister is studying computer science.... I didn’t inform her last night. I know she would be traumatized,” said a young male law student in Kabul, who asked not to be named for fear of the Taliban. “It really expresses (the Taliban’s) illiteracy and poor knowledge of Islam and human rights. If the situation continues like this, the future will be worse. Everyone is scared.”

“We have no power to do anything and there is no one to listen to us,” said one 29-year-old female, who is pursuing a master’s in Pashto literature in Kabul.

“We can’t protest, we are hopeless. In every aspect of life we are doomed,” she continued. “We don’t have jobs, we can’t go anywhere, and we can’t leave the country. We have lost everything.”

Although devastated, she still has a glimmer of hope that the Taliban — whose restrictions on women are escalating — will scale back on their decision after the winter break. “We will wait for the next three months to see if they change their order. They might change their policies and restart the universities.”

In the eastern city of Jalalabad, some male students walked out of their examinations to oppose the decision. The female student encouraged men to stop attending classes altogether in protest if the Taliban does not relent. “They too must stay at home until the girls are allowed to go back,” she pleaded.

Notably, the authorities have reverted to public floggings and executions of men and women in recent weeks as they enforce a strict interpretation of Islamic sharia law.



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