

“Afghanistan at Five: Shadows of Taliban Rule, the Human Cost, and Windows of Hope for a New Era” Concept Note

Introduction

August 2026 marks five years since the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021. This event brings together Afghan voices, human rights defenders, analysts, policymakers, civil society actors, and international stakeholders for a focused, evidence-based discussion. It examines the lived realities of the past five years under Taliban rule—particularly the systematic restrictions and hardships imposed on women, girls, and the broader population—while looking ahead to possible trajectories, including internal pressures, emerging resistance dynamics, and pathways that could open space for dignity, rights, and hope for the Afghan people.

Rationale

Five years of Taliban governance have produced a profound human rights and humanitarian crisis. Women and girls face near-total exclusion from secondary and higher education, severe limits on work, movement, and public life, and policies widely described by rights organisations as gender persecution or gender apartheid. Violence against women, including femicide and rising child marriage amid economic desperation, has intensified with weakened legal protections. The wider population endures economic collapse, food insecurity affecting tens of millions, mass returns of refugees, and eroded civic space, even as large-scale conflict has declined and security has improved in some respects. At the same time, recent developments—including heightened activity by opposition groups, tensions with neighbours, diplomatic isolation (with only limited formal recognition), and sustained international scrutiny (including ICC actions)—raise questions about the durability of the current order and the possibility of change. Marking this anniversary is essential to document experiences, prevent normalisation of the status quo, amplify Afghan perspectives (especially those of women), and explore realistic avenues for accountability, relief, and a more inclusive future. Silence or disengagement risks further entrenching suffering; informed dialogue can sustain attention and support practical hope.

Objectives

- Document and analyse the human, social, and economic impacts of five years of Taliban rule, with particular attention to the systematic restrictions and cruelties affecting women, girls, and ordinary Afghans.
- Examine emerging internal and external dynamics that may shape the next phase, including pressures on the current authorities and opportunities for positive transformation.
- Centre Afghan voices and lived experiences while fostering constructive, non-partisan discussion among diverse stakeholders.
- Identify practical recommendations for humanitarian support, accountability efforts, and sustained international engagement that prioritises the rights and well-being of the Afghan people.
- Contribute to a shared understanding of possible “windows of hope” toward a more just and inclusive Afghanistan.

Expected Outcomes

- A clear public record of the five-year human toll, grounded in evidence and testimony, that counters narratives of normalisation.
- Strengthened networks among Afghan civil society (including women-led initiatives), diaspora actors, researchers, and international partners.
- Concrete recommendations for governments, UN mechanisms, donors, and civil society on rights protection, humanitarian access, and non-recognition of repressive policies.
- Heightened awareness of both the severity of current conditions and credible pathways—however challenging—for change that could expand space for education, participation, security, and hope.
- A short outcome document or summary of key insights that can inform advocacy, policy, and further research.



Discussion Theme

Theme 1: Five Years of the Taliban Era – Documenting the Human Cost and Cruelty Against Women and the People of Afghanistan

This theme focuses on the lived record of 2021–2026. It examines the progressive imposition of restrictions that have erased women and girls from secondary education, most employment, and much of public life; the rise in gender-based violence, femicide, and child marriage under weakened protections; broader impacts on freedom of expression, minorities, former officials, and ordinary citizens; the parallel humanitarian emergency (food insecurity, malnutrition, strained health services); and the contrast between improved territorial control/security and deepening social and economic distress. Discussion will draw on documented patterns, personal testimonies where safe, and analysis of how these policies have shaped daily life and long-term prospects for Afghan society.

Theme 2: The Next Chapter – Prospects for Change, the Question of Taliban Continuity or Transformation, and Windows of Hope for a New Era

This theme looks forward. It considers internal pressures (economic hardship, emerging armed and political opposition activity, factional dynamics), regional relations, and international isolation as factors that could affect the durability of current rule. It explores scenarios ranging from continued consolidation to fragmentation or meaningful shift, while prioritising non-speculative analysis of what a post-crisis or reformed order might require. Central to the discussion is identifying realistic “windows of hope”: sustained support for women’s agency and education (including underground or alternative pathways), accountability mechanisms, humanitarian principles that do not legitimise repression, inclusive political processes if openings arise, and the resilience and aspirations of the Afghan people themselves for dignity, opportunity, and a future free from systematic cruelty.

Key Message

Five years of Taliban rule have entrenched one of the world’s gravest human rights crises—marked by systematic cruelty against women, girls, and the Afghan people—yet the resilience of Afghans and emerging pressures for change keep open vital windows of hope that the international community and Afghan voices must actively protect and expand.

Format

- Duration: 2 hours, comprising a keynote address, a moderated panel discussion, and an interactive Q&A session.
- Platform: Conducted via Zoom, with live streaming on the Bareen Initiative for Development’s website and social media channels to ensure global accessibility.
- Moderation: Facilitated by senior experts from the Bareen Initiative for Development to ensure rigorous, inclusive, and constructive dialogue.

Call to Action

The Bareen Initiative for Development (BID) calls on stakeholders to engage in this critical dialogue to reassess past policies and chart a principled path forward for Afghanistan and the region. Through rigorous analysis, collaborative innovation, and a commitment to justice, this seminar aims to contribute to the creation of safer, more equitable, and resilient communities. Join us to shape a future that upholds both strategic imperatives and universal human rights.