



AFGHANISTAN



Afghans' Liminal Civil Resistance to Taliban Rule

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Introduction

Mohammad Bouazizi was the 20-year-old Tunisian street trader who famously sparked the 2011 Arab Spring through a desperate act of protest in response to unrelenting police harassment.¹ Municipal officials confiscated Bouazizi's scales and his wares. Then the local governor refused the young man a hearing as he pleaded to retrieve his possessions. This was the last straw. When Bouazizi self-immolated, it triggered protests which toppled the regime and inspired movements against authoritarian rule across the Arab world.

In the nearly five years of restored Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the regime's heavy-handed approach has alienated much of the population and generated an unending supply of popular grievances. In an eerie parallel to the Bouazizi case, Taliban arbitrary rule has included repeated clampdowns on street traders. It is now a common occurrence for Kalashnikov-wielding security personnel to beat up pedlars, confiscating their carts and meagre goods – under the pretext of bringing order to Afghan cities.²

On multiple occasions, Taliban actions have indeed pushed Afghans to complain, protest and resist. These Afghan responses to Taliban rule amount to an emergent civil resistance.³ Civil resistance in Afghanistan has to date been episodic and localised, relative to some of the prominent international cases. But it has been real, widespread, and socially diverse. Examples like the June 2026 women's demonstrations in Herat, in response to a dress code clampdown by the city's morality police,⁴ have signalled public dissent against Islamic Emirate policies and preserved civic agency in the face of Taliban efforts to exclude the populace from decision-making.⁵ Some have attracted global attention.

But these demonstrations and other acts of protest and resistance have been rooted in Afghans' understanding of the political context of Taliban rule and assumptions about how regime change will eventually be brought about. The recent in-country experience of protest and resistance to the Emirate offers lessons which will prove valuable to any Afghans designing a strategy to challenge Taliban authoritarianism.⁶

Patterns of Resistance

In the course of our documentation of the Taliban's post-2021 state-building project, we have noted at least 13 forms of civil resistance undertaken by Afghans in response to Taliban rule.⁷ All of them have been initiated by Afghans who have remained in the country. They range from the critical speeches by members of the higher clergy (the ulema), made in the knowledge that Taliban may well detain them as a result,⁸ to the community-level demonstrations protesting threats to their livelihoods and rights – threats that arise from Taliban asserting state control over natural resources, subverting established property rights and selectively backing migrants to northern Afghanistan. Examples of resistance include sustained and creative women's activism which has pushed back against restrictions on education and other bans,⁹ as well as the myriad activities of civil society activists to defend independent civic space and circumvent restrictions.¹⁰

While multiple cases of civil resistance have been documented since 2021, the frequency of outbursts has increased since late 2025. The Taliban have not yet triggered an 'Afghan Spring', but nor have they succeeded in coercing the population to submit to their imposed system. Drawing on the cases that we have documented, we can draw some tentative conclusions about the Afghan experience of civil resistance to the Taliban's Islamic Emirate and what this tells us about possible pathways to peaceful change.

Today's civil resistance to the Taliban's Islamic Emirate is predominantly liminal – in the sense that resisters assume that their current brave but calibrated and limited actions will be followed by another phase of intensified and broader resistance. If you trust that the real struggle will take place later, then it makes sense to balance concerns for survival and conservation of forces with protesting sufficiently to maintain the salience of claims for restoration of rights and freedom. The latest women's protests in Herat, cited above, provide an example of this dynamic – intense enough to register nationally and internationally but wound down rapidly enough to avoid provoking a wider Taliban crackdown.

An illustrative example we noted of the liminal nature of resistance concerned one of the politicians who played a prominent national role during the Republic. After consultation with trusted associates, the politician opted to stay in Afghanistan rather than going into exile with much of the political elite after the collapse of the Republic. His resistance so far has consisted of witness (hearing community members' complaints and receiving petitions) and solidarity (by refusing to flee) and non-confrontational representational acts, such as accompanying community leaders in calling on the authorities at Eid (an essential way of maintaining channels of communication useful to the community).

The politician has coordinated his actions with a network active in the diaspora, on the basis of a division of labour between those inside and outside the country. By staying in Afghanistan and remaining as active as prudence allows, he has shared the precarious existence of fellow members of his community, while refusing to be coopted by the regime. The politician's approach is calculated to maintain his legitimacy in a context where those who fled abroad are commonly derided as self-interested cowards. But he has deliberately refrained from mobilisation, propagandising or visibly challenging the Taliban authorities. He has delegated the more provocative political tasks to members of the diaspora network who can operate abroad, out of reach of the regime. Members of his political network assume that open, active resistance will only start in the next and decisive phase. The politician states this explicitly: 'practical action is not my role for now'. By staying on in solidarity, the politician has boosted his personal credibility.¹¹

In the broader liminal division of labour, it falls to the clerics periodically to remind the regime and populace of the outstanding demands for change, while figures like the politician are to remain with their people, exercising caution while sustaining the belief that the regime is illegitimate and impermanent. They are ready for action when resistance moves to a decisive phase.¹²

Clergy have emerged as forthright critics of Taliban policies and actions – in terms of the frequency with which individual clerics have risked arrest by speaking out. This is especially significant given that Taliban have relied on regime-approved clerics to boost their claim to be running an Islamic system. There is of course a diversity of voices among the clergy critical of the Islamic Emirate. The intensification of suppression of Shia religious practice has pushed even some of most prominent Shia clerics, such as Ayatollah Waizada Behsudi, to use their pulpit to accuse Taliban of religious discrimination.¹³

Tajik and Uzbek clerics have articulated the grievances of their congregations. One of the significant episodes of clerical activism involved critical speeches in a press conference by Tajik clerics Mahmood ul Hassan and Abdul Qadir Qanit.¹⁴ They accused the Taliban Movement of imposing archaic tribal values under the guise of Islam and engaging in ethno-religious discrimination. In one of the earliest examples of clerical resistance, ulema in the Panjshir refused to endorse a Taliban-drafted fatwa condemning rebellion against the Emirate.¹⁵ And, given that the Taliban Movement has a predominantly Pashtun membership, it is significant that ulema critics of the regime have included Pashtun clerics, some with a history of proximity to the Taliban Movement.¹⁶

Taliban are particularly sensitive to criticism from the ulema. But they have not succeeded in completely silencing the critics. Taliban have ordered that only approved texts, centrally approved by the Haj and Auqaf administration, can be used in sermons. The Emirate authorities have resorted to detentions and house arrests and have extracted undertakings of compliant behaviour. But, as public sentiment has turned more decisively against the Islamic Emirate, the reputation of ulema prepared to speak out has been enhanced, encouraging some at least to persist in their criticism.

Civil resistance has been widespread and diverse – but has taken place without any national movement and with minimal coordination. There are examples from all major zones of the country, with protests in Kabul, other cities and the countryside. Those engaging in acts of resistance have included religious and lay people, women and men, those with a base in traditional tribal structures, as well as peasants and urban workers and destitute professionals.

There have been acts of resistance by dissident Taliban, most notably the principled speech by Deputy Foreign Minister Sher M. Abbas Stanakzai in late 2024 in which he called for the reopening of girls' schools. This resulted in him being forced into exile in the United Arab Emirates.¹⁷ Members of a key constituency of dissenting Taliban, the northern Tajiks and Uzbeks have generally avoided involving themselves in open resistance. They have proven prone to being bought off with minor appointments in the Emirate, while maintaining discrete contact with armed resistance fronts and exiled anti-Taliban leaders. But some have been involved in prolonged stand-offs with the national authorities, such as Badakhshan Taliban commander and sacked deputy governor of Zabul, Juma Fateh.¹⁸ Many rank-and-file Taliban have expressed their alienation by deserting and migrating to Iran as labourers.

Resistance has consistently been grievance-driven – focused on a range of shortcomings of Taliban rule. Issues raised have included loss of livelihoods (e.g. pensioners, poppy farmers,¹⁹ peasants in mining-affected areas²⁰ and those threatened by land grabbing and settlement,²¹ rickshaw drivers,²² and street traders). Grievances articulated have included religious and ethnic discrimination taken up by the clerics. And issues have included deprivation of rights and freedoms (women protesters, other civil society activists).

Liminal Resistance and the Prospects for a Freedom Movement

The calculated risks which Afghan civilians have repeatedly taken to protect their land and livelihoods – to demand restoration of their rights and to defy the restrictions which Taliban have imposed upon them – express a confidence in the country's future. As the stance of a people subject to occupation or an imposed regime, liminal resistance is a more active and forward-looking state than *attendism* (the stance of populations in occupied Europe which held back from resistance while waiting to see if the Nazis would prevail).²³ In speaking out, despite Taliban having criminalised criticism of the regime, and through their other acts of civil resistance, Afghans have shown courage and hope. We assess that the liminal resisters have confidence that they will in time regain their freedom. Although civil resistance may so far seem localised and episodic, the population remains separate from the Taliban authorities, with a remarkable absence of co-option or integration. While Taliban ideologues consider their 'Islamic system' a permanent order, there is a widespread assumption among the population that the Taliban hegemony is temporary.

In dialogue with Afghans critical of Taliban policies, who include some within the movement, we have noted three plausible broad scenarios of how Afghans might achieve regime change. Overall, these scenarios involve a combination of decisive civil resistance (moving beyond the liminal phase), with a political process, armed action and developments within the Taliban movement. These scenarios include revolt from within, popular uprising and territorial conquest (Box 1).

Box 1: Plausible regime change scenarios

Scenario 1) Revolt from within – Taliban unity fractures (perhaps encouraged by regional powers) and Taliban reformists turn against the dominant Kandahari-clerical leadership. In this case, emboldened resistance networks might ally with Taliban coup-makers to topple the Amir and impose a broad-based transitional government.

Scenario 2) Popular uprising – a mass movement mobilises the aggrieved urban population, capitalising on the relative lack of a base of support for the Taliban Movement in the cities. In this case it is the loss of cities which causes the fragmentation of the regime and paralyses its administration. This inspires popular opposition to spread and enables the emergence of a coalition strong enough to impose an inclusive transitional government.

Scenario 3) Territorial conquest – the anti-Taliban armed fronts acquire more capabilities (possibly through external support), enabling them to take and hold territory. Taliban defeats then inspire nationwide civil resistance, again paralysing the administration, even beyond the liberated zones, ultimately triggering regime collapse.

Challenges to be Addressed in Progressing beyond Liminal Resistance

Afghans attempting to intensify resistance to pose a credible threat to Taliban rule, under any of these scenarios, would of course face multiple challenges rooted in the structural realities of Taliban rule, the fragmented nature of Afghan society and the problematic political legacy of the Afghan Republic and its antecedents.

Mobilising beyond liminal civil resistance – 'belling the cat'. There is safety in numbers once a movement is under way. But it is generally assumed that first movers will be crushed by the authorities.

The transition from the stage of liminal resistance to a movement which can pose a realistic challenge to Taliban hegemony is unlikely to be achieved simply through mere increments – a few more mullah speeches, more roadblocks by people who have lost their livelihoods in mining projects or poppy eradication, or more women's demonstrations.

The decisive phase of resistance is likely to involve mass mobilisation. In our conversations with Afghans thinking about civil resistance, we have noted that many expect that a key trigger for intensification will be international support for regime change, combined with the availability of a rear base (a safe haven, beyond Taliban reach, for use as a staging area and where wounded can be cared for) and resources. Any activists hoping to 'bell the cat' by launching a national-level movement will need a strategy to deal with these expectations. They will either need to persuade the populace that they have the external support assumed necessary to success or they will need to demonstrate a strategy for achieving regime change without it.

We assess that in all three scenarios outlined above, the role of clerics as the public voice of the movement is one aspect of the liminal resistance likely to persist into the decisive phase. Any movement attempting to conduct mass mobilisation can be expected to rely on anti-Taliban clerics to claim religious legitimacy for its rebellion against the Emirate.

Coping with the Taliban's repressive apparatus will be a key challenge. The Islamic Emirate authorities have invested heavily in their intelligence agency and tasked it to deal ruthlessly with any sign of rebellion. They have developed extensive informer networks to penetrate communities and even families. They have a proactive approach in anticipating threats and conducting preventive arrests and summary executions. This creates a climate in which mobilisation is extraordinarily risky.

To date, Taliban have used calibrated violence against the liminal resistance. Numbers killed have been notably lower than during the suppression of rebellions during the Taliban Movement's first Emirate.²⁴ In their second period of rule, Taliban have not unleashed the kind of mass violence against civilians to which the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps resorted in January 2026.²⁵ But this Taliban restraint may not give a good indication of how the regime will respond to larger protests or to a fully-fledged national movement. In the wake of recent Iranian experience, any organisers of an Afghan national movement must anticipate the possibility that Taliban escalate violence as resistance approaches the point of threatening regime survival. One of the requirements for successful resistance will be adoption of smart tactics enabling protesters to withstand or subvert the stepped-up repression.

Addressing the country's fragmented social reality will also be a key challenge facing resisters in the decisive phase. Identity dynamics complicate the task of mobilisation. Ethnic, sectarian, and urban–rural grievances generate powerful motivations for resistance among the groups directly impacted. The Taliban Movement's overwhelmingly Pashtun leadership and their reliance on rural cadres to police cities deepen resentment but they do not automatically translate into unified mobilisation. Much of the liminal resistance has revolved around aggrieved Tajiks and Uzbeks, excluded from power and facing discrimination within the Taliban's Emirate. But a movement centred on such ethnic or localised grievances would risk being labelled as counter to the general Pashtun interest, thus consolidating Pashtun support for the Taliban Movement.

The choice of grievances around which to mobilise will be consequential. The main demand of Afghanistan's democratic opposition has long been the establishment of an inclusive political system. Therefore, it makes sense for any national movement to mobilise primarily around grievances with broad appeal across the country, such as breaking Taliban economic monopolies, restoring rights and freedoms and getting girls back into school. Ethnic grievances may be framed in terms of social justice rather than as a zero-sum competition between the ethnicities.

Finally, *Afghans seeking regime change are obliged to demonstrate a credible and attractive alternative*. Although several recent successful civil resistance movements around the world have been leaderless, they have typically drawn on some elements of established institutions and political leadership to manage the transition, as the regime collapses. Afghanistan's history of messy transition, most notably during the period 1992 to 1996, imposes a political and moral responsibility. Forming an alternative to the Emirate is a key outstanding challenge. The collapse of public trust in the institutions of the Republic and its political leadership rules out an offer of return to the 2021 status quo. Even if Afghans are successful in mounting effective mass civil resistance to weaken the regime, they will require a renewal of leadership and a new inclusive political coalition to secure the future.

Together, these constitute formidable challenges. But they are no more formidable than those which Taliban faced in mounting their armed resistance to the Afghan Republic and the international coalition which backed it.

Appendix

The 13 forms of liminal civil resistance to Taliban rule observed in Afghanistan

1. Shia clerics, in Kabul and the province, have spoken out in public against Taliban restrictions on freedom of worship, suppression of Shia jurisprudence and harassment of Shias.
2. Sunni clerics in Kabul and the provinces have spoken out in public against Taliban ethno-linguistic discrimination and extremist interpretation of Islam, in particular regarding the ban on girls' secondary education.
3. Disgruntled Taliban, in occasional public events, including during madrassah graduations, have publicly criticised their own regime's extremist policies, in particular the ban on girls' education.
4. Communities in northern Afghanistan have staged demonstrations against Taliban moves to settle migrants and allocate them land.
5. Communities in northern Afghanistan have staged demonstrations against Taliban monopolising the benefits from gold mining, and against environmental damage.
6. Communities in northern and southern Afghanistan have staged demonstrations against Taliban-run poppy eradication.
7. Women activists in the major cities have staged demonstrations against the education ban and creatively circumvented Taliban restrictions on their work and mobility.
8. Urban civil society activists have struggled to sustain cultural institutions and civic space in the face of restrictions and clampdowns.
9. Tribal-rural civil society activists in the south-east have sustained independent community action and resisted the Talibanisation of their communities.
10. Human rights field researchers, discretely conducting documentation across the country, have contributed to the systematic documentation of Taliban abuses.
11. Established political leaders, opposed to Taliban rule, have deliberately stayed in-country, living as part of their communities while briefing their supporter networks who are active outside of the country.
12. Street traders and informal economy actors in the major cities have held spontaneous demonstrations and complained about restrictions and arbitrary action by Taliban security personnel.
13. Pensioners in Kabul have demonstrated against the Taliban withholding their dues.

Endnotes

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² Prof. Semple and Mawlvi Atta ur Rahman have documented the Taliban's state-building project and responses to it as part of the PeaceRep initiative. Observations made in this article draw on research notes from this exercise.

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⁵ I am grateful to the reviewer for this characterisation.

⁶ Chenoweth (2021).

⁷ The authors documented cases of civic resistance while tracking developments in Afghanistan through original source reporting and monitoring of regional media. The 13 forms are listed in the appendix. They distinguish the initiator of the resistance, action taken, grievance raised and location

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¹¹ This account is based on discussions between the politician and the diaspora network to which he is linked. Author suspects that other figures and networks are discretely pursuing a similar approach.

¹² Briefings from politician and allied activists outside the country. Names withheld for their security.

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¹⁵ Afghanistan International (2023). 'Taliban Gathers Panjshir Clerics to Issue Fatwa Against Resistance Forces'. 18 April (www.afintl.com/en/202304184580).

¹⁶ For example, Mawlvi Abdul Sami Ghaznawi (www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=5617&task=view&total=5238&start=4440&Itemid=2).

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²² The Kabul Tribune (2025). 'Taliban Ban Rickshaw Traffic in Herat'. 31 December (<https://thekabultribune.com/en/0004097>); Sharif Amiry (2026). 'Taliban seize rickshaws in Herat traffic drive, owners warn of job losses', 13 January (<https://amu.tv/221100>).

²³ Halik Kochansk (2022). *Resistance: The Underground War in Europe, 1939-1945*. Alan Lane.

²⁴ Mawlvi Atta ur Rahman Saleem and Michael Semple (2024). 'Peace Matrix for Afghanistan: Strengthening Afghans' pursuit of democracy, freedom and economic recovery'. PeaceRep, 4 November (<https://peacerep.org/publication/peace-matrix-for-afghanistan>).

²⁵ Human Rights Watch (2026). 'Iran: Human Rights Situation Spirals Deeper into Crisis'. 4 February (www.hrw.org/news/2026/02/04/iran-human-rights-situation-spirals-deeper-into-crisis).

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