Media Capture Strategies in an Islamic Authoritarian Context:
The Case of the Taliban

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Taliban government's media capture strategies since retaking the country on August 15, 2021, and how journalists and media outlets have responded to these strategies. In particular, it focuses on the Taliban government's approach to the media, given the recent political transformation in Afghanistan and the religious and political ideologies of the Taliban regime. Qualitative methods were employed for this research, including online semi-structured in-depth interviews and document analysis. Interviews allowed for a deep investigation into the experience of journalists under what could be identified as the Taliban's media capture strategies. Thirty-five key media informants at the national level and from abroad were recruited for in-depth interviews by applying a purposive sampling technique. In addition, document analysis allowed for the detailed consideration of relevant Taliban policies and journalist support institutions' reports. Thematic coding was employed in the analysis of qualitative data using Nvivo 12 (software). The study revealed that the Taliban media capture strategies have multifaceted dimensions. From the analysis of media director and journalist interviews and relevant formal documents from the Taliban regime, seven media capture strategies emerge: (1) Regulatory interference, (2) Criminal prosecution of journalists, (3) Suppression of journalists, (4) Financial pressures on media outlets, (5) Media ownership, (6) Monopoly on information and (7) Expulsion of foreign journalists. Furthermore, this study finds that the Afghan media community, including the media outlets, journalists, and media unions, employed four tolerance strategies in response to the media capture strategies of the Taliban government, such as (1) Self-imposed censorship, (2) Low resistance, (3) Stopping controversial content, and (4) Advocacy campaigns. These findings contribute to existing knowledge and literature on media capture frameworks, showing how they may be applied to understand how media control works in the context of an authoritarian Islamic state.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, a relatively democratic, representative political system was formed in Afghanistan with the international community's support. The formation of democratic processes and the creation of political and civil institutions were part of this democratic system (Barry & Greene, 2009; Larson, 2021). The rise of a pluralistic and free media system and the legal recognition of freedom of speech and media freedom have arguably been some of the greatest achievements of the Afghan government in the last two decades (Luque, 2017; Yll & Parajon, 2008; Masomy, 2022). Despite the fragility of the democratic government and constant security concerns in Afghanistan, a vibrant new media system was formed with the support of the international community, especially the United States of America (Hatef & Cooke, 2020; Cary, 2012; Fraenkel, Schoemaker, & Himelfarb, 2010; Larson, 2021). The last 20 years have been remarkable for media freedom and freedom of expression. This "media revolution," established by the financial and political support of the United States, gave Afghanistan one of the most dynamic media industries in the region (Mahdi, 2021). According to Khalwatger (2021), there were 646 active media outlets in the country until August 2021, thanks to one of the region's most open media laws, allowing the right to access information worldwide. In fact, in 2018, Afghan journalists' access to Information jumped dramatically to an RTI rating of 139 points out of a possible 150 globally (CLD_WPE, 2018; Mendel, 2018).

Since the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban coming to power on August 15, 2021, most of this free and dynamic media system collapsed overnight. The prior achievements of media outlets faced serious threats from the Taliban. For example, 39.59% of media outlets closed, and 59.86% of journalists—especially women journalists (76.19%)—lost their jobs, leaving no women journalists in 11 provinces (RSF, News, 2022). According to RSF (2022), all this has happened due to a "deep economic crisis and the crackdown on press freedom." In addition, almost 300 media outlets were shut down, and at least 245 incidents against journalists and media workers--such as arrests, physical violence, threats and intimidation, injuries, and even deaths--happened under Taliban rule (AFJC, Special Reports, 2022).

Therefore, there is increasing concern that the space for media and journalists under the Taliban regime is getting narrower every day, and increasing restrictions are being imposed by the Taliban governmental bodies and authorities. In this challenging environment, the Afghan media community faces many ambiguities and uncertainties that may darken the future of

journalism and news media in Afghanistan. This indicates a need to understand the strategies being employed by the Taliban to regulate and exert some level of control over news media and journalism in the country.

This study aims to explore and categorize the Taliban's media capture strategies since they came to power in August 2021 and identify the journalists' and media outlets' strategies in response to this restrictive media capture. As a scholarly contribution, this study sheds some light on media capture strategies in general, their use by Islamic authoritarian regimes, and the strategies formed by journalists to navigate media capture strategies from below.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q1- What are the Taliban's media capture strategies vis a vis the media and journalists since coming to power?

Q2- How do Afghan journalists and media organizations navigate and respond to the Taliban's policies regarding journalism and the news media?

LITERATURE REVIEW: MEDIA CAPTURE AS A FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

In the most prevalent definition, media capture refers to "a situation in which the media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous in manifesting a will of their own, nor able to exercise their main function, notably of informing people. Instead, they have persisted in an intermediate state, with vested interests, not just the government, using them for other purposes" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013, p. 41). Traditionally, scholars have illustrated the economic theory of media capture to explore the relations between authoritarian regimes and media outlets (Besley & Prat, 2006; Petrova, 2008'; Corneo, 2006). For the first time, Besley and Prat (2006) employed the term media capture in the paper entitled: "Handcuffs for the Grabbing Hand? Media Capture and Government Accountability," which developed an analytical model of capture that focused on "media bias that is induced by political capture." This model highlighted that "media pluralism provides effective protections against capture" and "media independence reduces capture."

While most of the fundamental research on media capture in different contexts has been carried out regarding the capture of the media by economic elites and companies, in recent years, there is a growing body of literature on media capture by governments in a variety of contexts from new authoritarian regimes to democratic governments.

For instance, Coskun (2020) found that the Justice and Development Party, Turkish ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP) government in Turkey used a three strategy to capture mass media: establishing private media, financial sanctions, and intimidating and criminalizing journalists. The study argued that the APK government systematically forced media owners to exit the media industry using government powers and financial sanctions. According to the study, the government changed the ownership of mass media outlets by creating its own loyal and partisan media. In addition, the APK government has targeted non-government media outlets not under their direct influence with fines and intimidated journalists critical of the government by using legal repression and threats of imprisonment.

More recent arguments regarding media capture policy in the liberalized media sector documented new strategies to control the media in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, in a mixed method study by Höglund and Schaffer (2021) entitled "Resisting media capture: Mobilizing for media freedom in Uganda," the authors pointed out the strategies of journalists and media houses to resist the government's controlling policies, which opened a new chapter in the field of media's Resistance to government attempts at media capture. The study identified four main media capture strategies employed by the Ugandan government: "(1) regulatory interference, (2) ownership domination, (3) criminal prosecution on trumped-up charges, and (4) assaults on journalists." The study found that despite the strict policies on media control in Uganda, the media community of this country uses five common methods to develop and implement responses, including public advocacy, legal mobilization, direct action to free detained colleagues and media blackouts, and the limits of Resistance to mobilizing against the government's media capture.

Similarly, another major study from Colombia University (Stiglitz, 2017) titled "Toward a Taxonomy of Media Capture" explored four broad and somewhat overlapping forms of media capture: (1) ownership, (2) financial incentives, (3) censorship, and (4) cognitive capture. This study suggests that media capture, in addition to major methods such as ownership, occurs in more subtle methods, which he referred to as cognitive capture. The author points out that fighting against the "most insidious form of capture," particularly cognitive capture, is hard. However, a better understanding of these capture mechanisms will inform the media of impartial reporting and can mitigate controls and consequences.

In an empirical study, Enikolopov and Petrova (2015) demonstrated the media capture determinants and the consequences in a situation where governments and interest groups want to

control media content. The empirical findings in this study provide a new understanding of how governments and sponsor groups capture the media that can affect people's behaviors. The study finds that governments use a variety of ways to control media, such as censorship, sponsorship through direct ownership, advertising, and media regulation.

With regard to Afghanistan, only one study has been conducted to explore media capture strategies. Relly and Zanger (2016) attempted to draw a multi-pronged model of media capture in the context of Western-originated news media development in Afghanistan. These scholars used an inductive approach to identify four prongs of media capture: government capture, political-actor capture, violent-actor capture (Taliban, warlords, 'insurgents,' mafia), and foreign-donor capture. However, no specific previous study has systematically investigated the Taliban's media capture policy as a newly re-established Islamic authoritarian regime. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this research gap and identify the Taliban's media capture strategies since they came to power in August 2021. It also explores the journalists' and media outlets navigating strategies to respond to this restrictive media capture in the Islamic authoritarian context.

Case Background: Media Landscape Under Taliban Rule

In two periods of governance and two decades as insurgents, the Taliban showed in practice that they were inherently against liberal notions of media freedom. Mehran (2022) accordingly highlights the Taliban's media strategy in three phases. The first period of rule (1996-2001), the second of insurgency (2001-2021), and the third in their return to power in August 2021. Her paper argued that during the first period of their rule the Taliban imposed strict control on the Afghan media, including closing state-run television stations and banning watching television, photography, music, the internet, and all types of entertainment. Under Taliban rule the presence of international media was severely limited, and the local media were under the strict control of the Taliban. The only state-run radio station, Sharia Voice Radio, mainly broadcasts propaganda and some news and conveys religious messages (Yll & Parajon, 2008; Mehran, 2022). In 2001, after the U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan and the initial defeat of the Taliban, the group's approach to the media changed dramatically. After over two decades of insurgency, the Taliban developed a sophisticated media strategy that significantly contributed to the military advance that retook control of regions across Afghanistan in the lead-up to U.S. withdrawal in August 2021 (Johnson, DuPee, & Shaaker, 2018; Mehran, 2022).

The media strategies and propaganda approaches of other jihadist Islamist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, inspired the Taliban's media strategy in the last two decades. The Taliban utilized traditional and new media, especially social media (Ward, 2018; Osman & Gopal, 2016). The Taliban's attempts were mainly focused on recruitment, disinformation, and propaganda in war (Bahar, 2020; Drissel, 2014), along with the promotion of their particular religious ideology (Mehran, 2022), focusing on social media in order to weaken the international public's resolve to oppose the Taliban actively (Bernatis, 2014). Violence and assaults on journalists and media outlets were integral to the Taliban media strategies during the last two decades (HRW, 2015).

Since returning to power in August 2021, the Taliban has adopted a new media strategy reflecting their ideological policies of the 1990s, along with the continuity and specific media approaches adopted during the two decades of insurgency (Mehran, 2022). Currently, media outlets and journalists face significant violence, repression, and severe restrictions under Taliban rule (HRW, 2022). On the other hand, a Reporters Without Borders (RSF) survey reveals that since the Taliban took over the country in 2021, 39.59% of media outlets were shut down, 59.86% of journalists, especially women journalists (76.19%) lost their jobs, and 11 provinces no longer have any working women journalists. RSF (2022) reported that all this has happened due to a "deep economic crisis and the crackdown on press freedom."

According to the Afghanistan Journalists Center (2022), one year after the Taliban returned to power, at least 245 "incidents" against journalists and media workers occurred, including arrests, physical violence, threats and intimidation, injuries, and even deaths. The Afghan Journalists' Center's findings show that almost 300 media outlets were closed under Taliban rule due to economic problems and imposed work restrictions, leaving hundreds of professional journalists out of work. AFJ report highlights that during this time, the regime imposed severe restrictions on the Afghan media community, including beatings, threats, and other acts of intimidation against journalists, as well as censorship limitations of access to information in ways recently unprecedented.

The Taliban's restrictive policies have caused Afghanistan's position in international media freedom ratings to fall significantly. By 2021 before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan had risen to 122nd out of 180 countries in the RSF's Press Freedom Index, but under Taliban rule it has fallen to 156th out of 180 countries (RSF, News, 2022). As interview data below will demonstrate, this dramatic fall is due to the Taliban's strict media policies and an atmosphere of fear and intimidation for those in the Afghan media community.

In addition, the Taliban enacted several restrictive formal and informal orders targeting the media and journalists—particularly women. Such orders include the "11-article Decree on Journalism," the "8-Journalism-Rule," and several official and informal orders which strictly limited the activities of the Afghan media community (RSF, 2022). RSF (2021) described the Taliban's 11-article decree on journalism as a "dangerous journalism rule" that opens the door for Censorship and persecution and deprives journalists of their independence. Moreover, according to Human Rights Watch (2022), the new media policies and the Taliban's threats against journalists reflect a broader attempt to silence all criticism of the Taliban's rule. Finally, The International Federation of Journalists called these regulations "arbitrarily interpreted to censor broadcast content and restrict press freedom" (IFJ, 2021).

METHODS

This exploratory study employed qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews to explore the narratives and experiences of journalists and media professionals, and document analysis to examine the specific orders and policies of the Taliban regarding media operations in the country and Journalists' Supports organizations' reports related to media under Taliban. Together, these data collection methods help to paint a picture of the Taliban's media capture strategies and how Afghan media outlets and journalists continue to navigate their professional terrain.

In-Depth Interviews

The main qualitative data for this study was collected through online semi-structured in-depth interviews with open-ended questions from June 11 through August 11, 2022. Semi-structured interviews allow research participants to have some flexibility to discuss what is important to them and for the interviewer to ask additional follow-up questions. This allows the conversation to flow more naturally and explore in-depth topics if appropriate (Hesse-Biber, 2016).

All interviews were conducted in Persian and Pashto, Afghanistan's official languages, and then translated into English. The in-depth interviews were carried out online by the researcher and two trained research assistants using fully secure platforms on WhatsApp and Skype, and interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees for

transcription (along with interview notes). They were asked to sign an informed consent form. Each interview lasted between 40-60 minutes.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit the participants who fulfilled the necessary knowledge criteria. Thirty-five media key informants from the Afghan media community both on the ground and abroad, including the editors-in-chief and directors of media outlets, senior journalists, and directors of journalists' unions from various types of media outlets such as T.V., radio, news agency, print media, online multimedia platforms, and media houses at the national level. Since there was no complete list of active media outlets in Afghanistan, we purposively developed our own list of media outlets in an attempt to sample the combination of small, medium, and large media organizations operating in Afghanistan. To ensure that the sample is representative of the country, the interviewees were systematically selected from all five main regions of Afghanistan (central, southern, western, eastern, and northern zones) and Afghan exiled media community with relatively equal gender composition. The recruiting of the interviewees continued until the desired sample size was reached.

Document Analysis

This method was employed to analyze formal media policies, administrative letters, and speech transcripts from Taliban authorities as well as Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the International Federation of Journalists - IFJ, Afghanistan Journalists' Center (AFJC) reports relevant to the media situation under Taliban rule from September 2021 to Feb 2023. Specifically, the Taliban formal orders are included two main policies concerning journalism, several administrative letters expanding on these policies, and a press conference of Qari Yosouf Ahmadi, the interim director of the Taliban Government's Media and Information Center, regarding the new guidelines for media content, delivered about a month after the Taliban's return to power.

Analysis of Interview Data and Documents

Thematic analysis was employed to code all interview data using qualitative analysis software (Nvivo 12) to bring forth a media capture model from both inductive and deductive approaches. After data collection and verbatim transcription, all transcriptions were reviewed

multiple times, line by line, to begin to establish thematic codes and take detailed notes. Then, the transcribed data were coded into descriptive, categorical, and analytical themes. In this step, the participants' similar responses were grouped into some more general categories. After that, some categorical codes were grouped into broader, analytical codes. According to Hesse-Biber (2016), there are many "ways to" code qualitative data, which can be in various forms, such as descriptive, categorical, and analytical codes.

This study employed text analysis for document and content analysis of the Taliban's formal rules, administrative letters, speeches, and journalists' support organizations reports. After that, the document review findings were combined and integrated with in-depth interview data in the final analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Several crucial ethical standards were considered in this study. First, the study participants were fully informed about the research protocol, including the fact that participation would be completely voluntary, and signed an informed consent form to participate. Second, the in-depth interview process details were explained to all interviewees. Third, as mentioned in the inform-consent form, participants were informed that they could stop their participation at any time. Also, the researcher explained to the interviewees that they would not be faced with physically nor psychologically harmed throughout the study process, and the research team would only see the transcripts of the interviews. Finally, persevering the anonymity of the interviewees was an utmost priority for this study, given the potential for Taliban's government (or other forms of) reprisal. To ensure the interviewees' anonymity, identities were removed or replaced in the transcription process, and pseudonyms were given to each interviewee in the write-up of findings, whereupon submission for publication all identifying information (in notes and consent forms) was erased/destroyed.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to investigate the Taliban government's key media capture strategies since they came to power in Afghanistan. In addition, this study explored how Afghan media outlets and journalists navigate and respond to those media capture strategies. A qualitative study, in-depth interviews, and document analysis were used to realize research objectives and address the research questions. Thirty-five in-depth interviews were conducted with the editor-in-chief of media outlets, senior journalists, and heads of journalists' houses from various media

organizations at the national level. Among the media outlets, eleven participants (31.4%) were worked for radio, seven participants (20%) for T.V., five participants (14.3%) for Radio and T.V., two participants (5.76%) from the newspaper, five participants (14.3%) from online news websites, five participants (14.3%) from journalists and media houses. Of the 35 participants, 29 (82.8%) identified as male, and six (17.2%) were female. In terms of participants' jobs, 57.1 percent (n=20) were editor-in-chief or directors of media outlets, 28.6 percent (n=10) were senior journalists, and 14.3 percent (n=5) were directors of media and journalists' houses. All the participants of the study have been working for the media operating in various local, regional, and national levels in the five major regions of Afghanistan and exiled media, including; 31.4 percent from Kabul (n=11), 20 percent from the western region (n=7), 14.2 percent from the northern region (n=5), 11.4 percent from the eastern region (n=4), 5.7 percent from the southern region (n=2) and 11.4 percent from Afghan exiled media (n=4).

The participants of this study were purposively recruited from the media organizations that published in both the official languages of the country, including Farsi and Pashto. For example, 33.3 percent (n=10) were worked for Farsi language media; 23.3 percent (n=7) were worked from Pashto language media, and 43.3 percent (n=13) worked for the media which broadcast/published in both Farsi and Pashto languages.

Q1. What are the Taliban's media capture strategies to control the media and journalists?

This study argues that since the Taliban came to power on August 15, 2021, this authoritarian regime has formulated a set of extensive and intentional restrictions on the activities of the media and journalists across the country to legitimize their rule and control the narrative in the media. The study revealed that the Taliban media capture strategies have multifaceted dimensions consisting of seven main themes and ten sub-themes that emerged from initial codes, such as (1) regulatory interference, (2) criminal prosecution of journalists, (3) suppression of journalists, (4) financial pressures on media, (5) media ownership, (6) monopoly on information and (7) expulsion of foreign journalists. Each of these media capture strategies should be understood as follows below (Figure 1).

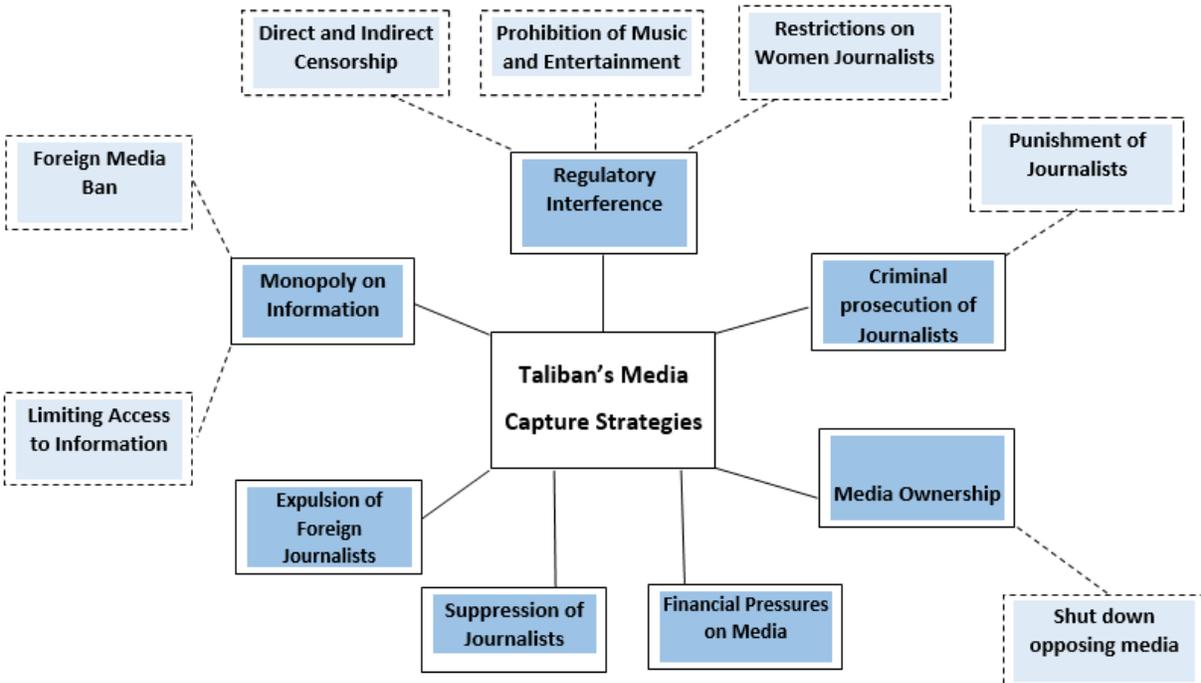**Figure 1: Current Media Capture Strategies of the Taliban**

Figure 2: Coding Process Table for Qualitative Data

No	Descriptive Codes	Categorical Codes	Analytical Codes (Themes and Sub-themes)
1	"We cannot publish news reflecting the weakness of the Taliban." "We are under the pressure of the ruling regime and are being censored." "Censorship is directly terribly imposed on us by the Taliban" "They directly monitor everything, and even before publishing." "It is forbidden to broadcast music and foreign drama "Our female colleagues are not allowed to participate in press conferences of Taliban." "Presenters to wear their faces with Mask and Islamic Hijab for safety." ''we do not have any female employees under the Taliban rule."	Taliban's Restriction on Media content Concerns on Women's Challenges in Media	**Regulatory Interference** - Direct and Indirect Censorship - Prohibition of Music and Entertainment - Restrictions on Women Journalists
2	"Taliban charged us with propaganda against the regime" and "espionage." "They [Taliban] falsely accused me, provided no evidence, and imprisoned me." "Produced and published against the policy of the Islamic Emirate." "Taliban's court would decide to cancel the media license and punish ten media directors." "The court has reviewed this issue for the final decision of Dar al-Fata." "Taliban imprisoned and punished several journalists for preparing critical reports." "The producer of Nowruz radio programs had been sentenced to one year without trial for writing a post on Facebook."	Violation of the Taliban's red lines The threat of punishment and imprisonment	**Criminal Prosecution of Journalists** - Punishment of journalists

3	"Taliban significantly crackdown and intimidate journalists and media." "Both the head of the news department and I, as a chief editor, were threatened many times." "Taliban use all forms of intimidation and repression, such as beatings, harassment, torture, arrests, and threats." "At any moment, the Taliban may take our colleagues and beat them." "They come into the studio with weapons." "We do not have mental security."	Taliban's assaults on journalists and media Extreme fear of the Taliban	**Suppression of Journalists and Media**
4	"Financial problems are one of the biggest challenges facing media." "Stopping public service announcements." "Inspecting media bank accounts." "Additional payments of media to municipalities" Pay the frequency license and renewal fee." "Increasing heavy tax fines."	Increasing media financial problem Paying additional fees to the Taliban	**Financial Pressures on Media**
5	"The Taliban use all public media as a propaganda platform." "In the public media, we became the propaganda machine of the Taliban." "Taliban's government and the Taliban-affiliated figures established several new media outlets." "Many media are now directly and indirectly owned or dominated by the Taliban." "Taliban government bodies have imposed such restrictions and censorship on the private media." "Taliban's government suspended the internet domain of the Hasht-e-Subh (8 AM) Newspaper and Zawia Media websites."	Full control over public media by the Taliban Taliban's Rule over independent media	**Media Ownership** - Shutting down Opposing Media

6	"Sharing the information that they want" "The main problem is the lack of freedom of expression." "Taliban's local authorities in the provinces are not allowed to talk to the local media." "Taliban officials do not answer our questions."	Lack of access to reliable Information	**Monopoly on Information** - Limiting Access to Information - Foreign Media Ban
	"We condemn the suspension of foreign media news broadcasts through local media." "Taliban banned the F.M. broadcast of two well-known US-funded radio stations." "Blocked access to the Voice of America (VOA) 's and Azadi Radio's Persian and Pashto websites." "The Taliban ordered local broadcasters to stop carrying news bulletins produced by the four international broadcasters."	Taliban's opposition to foreign media	
7	"Taliban regime targets foreign journalists who seem to produce critical reporting." "Three foreign journalists were expelled from Afghanistan."	Imposing restrictions on foreign journalists	**Expulsion of Foreign Journalists**
	"I left Afghanistan today after three days of cat-and-mouse with Taliban intelligence agents." "It is sad to see how Taliban further isolate the country by pushing out foreign journalists." "Severely curtailed foreign journalists' freedom." "Requiring them [foreign journalists] to have permission to report from specific areas."	Taking freedom of action of foreign journalists	

1. **Regulatory Interference**

Since the Taliban took over the country in August 2021, the Taliban government has significantly employed regulatory power to interfere with freedom of the media and speech. According to the data collected here, the Taliban government has issued a series of formal and informal extensive restrictions that media outlets and journalists are obliged to obey. Almost all study participants pointed out that the Taliban ignored the previous media laws and regulations that guaranteed press freedom. No specific law protects and supports Afghanistan's media and journalists' rights. All Participants mentioned that the Taliban government bodies, by issuing several formal decrees, administrative letters, and even informal/verbal orders, the Taliban have imposed significant restrictions on the activities of the media and journalists. For example, "11 journalism rules, an Eight-article order for T.V. stations and several oral/unformal orders that Taliban officials impose on media and journalists across the country which implemented nationally by the Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, Ministry of Information and Culture, and the General Intelligence Directorate of the Taliban.

In September 2021, Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi, the interim director of the Taliban Government Media and Information Center (GMIC) in Kabul, announced the first "11 journalism rules" during a meeting with media outlets directors and journalists (RSF, 2021).

The "11 Journalism Rules" set by the Taliban

1. Topics that are against Islam should not be published.
2. Do not insult national figures in media activities.
3. Do not insult national and personal privacy.
4. The media and journalists should not distort news content.
5. Journalists should consider journalistic principles in their writing.
6. The media should consider balance in their broadcasting/publications
7. Matters that officials have not confirmed at the time of broadcasting or publication should be treated with care.
8. Matters that could have a negative impact on the public's attitude or affect morale should be handled carefully when being broadcast or published.

9. The media should maintain their impartiality in news dissemination and publish everything that is true.

10. The government media and information center (GMIC) try cooperating with the media and journalists and provide facilities for preparing reports. The media will prepare their detailed reports in coordination with this center.

11. In the government media and information center (GMIC), for the convenience of the media and journalists, a specific form has been prepared to prepare reports with the cooperation of this department.

Furthermore, the findings of the study show that these orders of the Taliban have imposed heavy restrictions on two main areas: (1) on media content broadcasting (including direct and indirect Censorship and the prohibition of music and entertainment programs) and (2) restrictions on women journalists in the media.

Direct and Indirect Censorship

This study reveals that the Taliban's key strategy to capture Afghan media has been to impose heavy restrictions on media content through direct and indirect censorship. In November 2021, two months after the Taliban came to power, the Taliban's Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice formulated the redlines of broadcast content on Afghan televisions by compiling an eight-point rule. According to this order, it is prohibited to broadcast the following items through Afghan televisions: (1) Broadcasting films that are against the principles of Sharia and Afghan values; (2) Broadcasting foreign films against Afghan culture and traditions and promoting immorality; (3) Broadcasting comedy and entertainment programs that insult and insult people; (4) Broadcasting serials in which religious rituals and human dignity are insulted; (5) Broadcasting films and videos that show exposing men's intimate parts; (6) The appearance of female journalists without a hijab on television; (7) Broadcasting of serials in which a female actress has played a role; and (8) Broadcasting of serials and films in which Prophets and Companions have acted, and their images are displayed.

In addition to these formal/written rules that severely restrict the Afghan media, the study participants stated a set of informal/verbal rules imposed on them by the Taliban authorities, and they are obliged to adhere to them. The interview findings show that the media outlets and journalists in Afghanistan are extensively experiencing various types of Censorship, including

direct Censorship, indirect Censorship, and self-censorship, due to the Taliban's formal and informal rules to curtail media freedom.

For example, the editor-in-chief of a local radio station in the eastern province of Nangarhar, noted:

> "We cannot broadcast political and critical news. We cannot publish news reflecting the weakness of the Taliban government. We had to stop investigative reporting" (Participant 12).

A common view among interviewees was that the intelligence department of the Taliban threatens media directors and journalists daily, warned to censor their content according to Taliban policies.

For example, the director of a popular news agency stated:

> "Unfortunately, all active media in Afghanistan, including our media, are under the pressure of the ruling regime and are being censored. We are warned and threatened directly and indirectly by the Taliban" (Participant 1).

> "Censorship is directly terribly imposed on us by the Taliban. From turning on the broadcasting transmitter to the choice of presenter, the tone used, the broadcast content, and the selection of the report's topics, it is influenced by the Taliban. When we prepare a report, the Taliban soldier stands behind the camera and sees what we have captured while taking a video. When we interview the Taliban, after the interview, they listen to their interview and order to reduce this part, remove this part" (Participant 14).

A senior journalist who works for a national-wide and popular news T.V. station in Kabul noted:

> "Taliban fighters are present in the offices of many T.V. stations in Kabul under the pretext of ensuring the security of the media. They directly monitor everything, and even before publishing, we must send our security-related news reports to the Taliban to check and broadcast after their approval" (Participant 26).

Several Afghan local media chief editors in the northern and eastern provinces admitted that they must text the reports to the Taliban's Information and Culture Department for review and approval. For example, the editor-in-chief of a private radio station in the eastern province of Nangarhar reported:

"In Jalalabad, we must send the text of the reports to the Taliban Intelligence and Culture Departments for approval before broadcasting. No news or reports against the Taliban should be published" (Participant 12).

In addition, the director of a T.V. station in Kunduz province stated:

"We lost our freedom in the current government. We should have permission to broadcast the reports from the Taliban Intelligence and Culture Department. If the Taliban allow, we will publish these reports. "Unfortunately, no media is allowed to broadcast reports that are not according to the Taliban's wishes"(Participant 16).

According to the findings, media outlets and journalists in Afghanistan were forced to accept the Taliban's formal censorship to save their lives and self-impose censorship from selecting the topics to how to prepare and edit news reports.

Prohibition of Music and Entertainment

Since the Taliban came to power, the Taliban government prohibited broadcasting any music and entertainment programs on Afghan broadcast media outlets. According to the interviewees, even broadcasting some Islamic music is banned. The Afghan media chief editors who participated in this study pointed out that they were forced to stop broadcasting any types of music concerts and music on the orders of the Taliban. For example, a local radio manager in the southern province of Kandahar mentioned:

"The authorities of the Islamic Emirate called me many times directly and ordered us to stop playing music on the radio"(Participant 18).

Another editor-in-chief of a T.V. station from the western province, Farah, noted:

"We had to stop our entertainment programs. We used to have music on T.V. and social media, but now it is forbidden to broadcast music and foreign drama, and we lost many audiences because of this" (Participant 8).

A television director in northern Balkh province said:

"We were threatened with death several times by the Taliban authorities for broadcasting music and T.V. series. They threatened us that they would close our T.V. if we broadcast

music. So, we stopped broadcasting music, concerts, and foreign movies" (Participant 13).

In another example, a local T.V. director in the western province of Herat mentioned that he received many threats from the Taliban intelligence department to stop broadcasting even patriotic music and musical commercials.

He reported:

> "We played patriotic music to strengthen national unity and raise the morale of the people, but the Taliban threatened us that we are no longer allowed to broadcast music, even instrumental music, in T.V. programs and commercials" (Participant 9).

These findings reveal that after the banning of the entertainment and music programs by the Taliban several broadcast media outlets have increased their religious and educational programs instead.

Restrictions on Women Journalists

The study's findings show that one of the Taliban's media capture strategies targeted women journalists and actresses in Afghanistan. According to the Taliban 8- journalism rule, issued in November 2021, women T.V. journalists must wear an Islamic hijab on T.V., and the broadcast of dramas and soap operas featuring female actors is prohibited. Furthermore, according to the Taliban formal order regarding mandatory hijab for women, media outlets are obligated to produce programs regarding the importance and benefits of Hajib, with an emphasis on the value of women staying at home.

In addition to the Taliban's formal rules, a wide range of informal/verbal rules imposed strict restrictions on women journalists' presence in media and women-oriented content on broadcast media. Almost all the chief editors of T.V. channels in Kabul and provinces who participated in this study mentioned that they informally received an order from the Taliban ministry Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, women journalists, and T.V. anchors, in addition to observing the Islamic hijab must wear masks on air.

For example, a director of a national news T.V. network in Kabul reveals his personal experience:

"After this Taliban's order, I had to tell my female reporters and presenters to wear their faces for safety. Right now, our female journalists and anchors wear masks on all T.V. shows while they also observe the Islamic hijab. For a while, my male colleagues and I also wore masks to show solidarity with women journalists" (Participant 4).

Moreover, the study finds more restrictions on women journalists in the provinces than in the capital, Kabul. Interviewees reported that Taliban local authorities impose many informal regulations against the activities of women journalists and female media workers. In most provinces of Afghanistan, female journalists are not allowed to work in the media. According to participants, the media owners in many provinces, due to the Taliban threats and pressures, fired their female employees or women journalists close to leave the profession due to the Taliban threats and pressures.

For example, a director of a journalist's house in Kabul mentioned:

"Our research show that in most provinces of Afghanistan, there are no women journalists anymore. Only in Kabul and some major cities, female journalists can work, but they still face severe restrictions" (Participant 30).

Also, a manager of a T.V. network in Farah province stated:

"There are many restrictions on the activities of female journalists, and no female journalists are allowed to work in the media in Farah province" (Participant 8).

Another participant who is the director of a local radio station in the eastern province of Laghman, noted:

"We used to have four female employees on my radio, but now we do not have any female employees under the Taliban rule. Also, we cannot broadcast programs related to women" (Participant 20).

An interviewee who manages one of the pioneers' T.V. news stations in Kabul reported:

"Taliban authorities are putting pressure on us that women should not appear on T.V." (Participant 4).

A senior woman journalist who works for a radio station in Kabul mentioned:

"Our female colleagues are not allowed to participate in press conferences with the Taliban. Even Female journalists are not allowed to interview Taliban officials" (Participant 7).

2. **Criminal Prosecution of Journalists**

The criminal prosecution of journalists has been key to the Taliban media capture strategy. This study finds that since the Taliban came to power in August 2021, the intelligence body of this government has charged, arrested, and punished numerous journalists on what proved to be false charges. This punitive strategy has been used to target journalists who criticize the Taliban government on mainstream and social media platforms. Several study participants mentioned that journalists have been arrested and imprisoned without trial while covering the events or after broadcasting their reports. However, the Taliban charged them with "propaganda against the Taliban," "espionage," and "relation with the opposition groups.

A director of a local T.V. station in northern Afghanistan reported:

"The Taliban temporarily arrested my colleagues several times and threatened to imprison us if something was produced and published against the policy of the Islamic Emirate" (Participant 14).

In another example, the chief editor of an important news T.V. in Kabul explained his experience as follows:

"Our voice is silenced; we have no right to broadcast critical or negative news. The Taliban have imprisoned our colleagues for some time without mentioning the reason or providing the necessary evidence for the accusation"(Participant 27).

A manager of a local media in the southern region who was arrested by the Taliban and spent some time in a Taliban prison mentioned:

"They falsely accused me, did not provide any evidence and put me in prison, and then threatened to stop propaganda against the Taliban while we had not committed any crime" (Participant 19).

The key informants participating in this study pointed out that there are currently no specific laws and regulations for the media in the country, and the Taliban have ignored the

previous media laws. They mentioned that the Taliban government bodies consider any media activity perceived as harmful to them as "against national security and interests," "negative propaganda against themselves," and "incitement of public opinion." Almost all participants agreed that the Taliban make "false accusations" against journalists without providing the necessary evidence to pressure or prosecute them.

Punishment of Journalists

The findings of this study show that the Taliban imprisoned and punished several journalists for preparing critical reports and writing their views on social media. According to two senior journalists who are the heads of two journalism support organizations in Kabul, several journalists and two video bloggers have spent months in Taliban's prison without their charges being proven by the court and without trial. For example, Khaled Qaderi, a Radio Nowruz producer in Herat, Abdul Hanan Mohammadi, the Pajhwok News Agency reporter in Kapisa, and Mirza Hassani, the owner of Radio Aftab in Daikundi province, were in Taliban prison for several months without providing any reason or evidence (RSF, 2022, AFJC, 2022, and CPJ, 2022). In the meantime, Khalid Qaderi, the producer of Nowruz radio programs, had been sentenced to one year without trial for writing a post on Facebook.

Furthermore, the Taliban's Ministry of Information and Culture restructured the media violations investigation commission to identify the media and journalists who have violated the Taliban's regulations and introduce them to the court. For example, Abdulhaq Hemmad, the head of the media monitoring at theTaliban's Ministry of Information and Culture, mentioned to the media that the Taliban's court would decide on canceling the license of the media and punishing ten of the media whose directors are outside the country and publish "disinformation and propaganda against Islamic Emirate.

He mentioned in an interview with TOLO TV:

> "They [The media directors) did not come to the court even though we called and emailed them. We have yet to receive a response. We are forced to suspend their media license through the court. They publish false news against the Islamic Emirate and content against Islamic values. Even the court has reviewed this issue for the final decision of Dar al-Fata."

3. Suppression of Journalists and Media

After returning to power in august 2021, the Taliban significantly began to crack down and intimidate journalists and media workers. Mainly journalists came to cover the street protests and criticized Taliban policies. According to interview findings, the Taliban government, with assaults on journalists and media, has used all forms of intimidation and repression, such as beatings, harassment, torture, arrests, and threats to full control of journalists and media outlets. The majority of participants of this study mentioned that they or their colleagues had experienced various cases of intimidation and violence by Taliban fighters within the last year.

For example, the director of a popular news agency in Kabul reported:

> "There is no doubt that formally and informally, the Taliban does not like the activities of the free media, and they threaten us in various ways and pressure us. From jailing journalists to beatings and direct threats, this has a negative impact on how we cover"(Participant 1).

> "Both the head of the news department and I, as a chief editor, were threatened many times by the Taliban intelligence department because of broadcasting some news and using some words" (Participant 22).

A senior journalist who works as an editor of an online newspaper mentioned that the Taliban captured media by beating and torturing journalists. He asserted:

> "Ever since our journalists were beaten and tortured by the Taliban, we must be more careful. At any moment, the Taliban may take our colleagues and beat them." (Participant 5)

A director of a T.V. network from the northern province Balkh stated:

> "We do not have mental security; at any moment, there is a possibility that Taliban fighters will enter our studio and treat us badly. They come into the studio with weapons. We are really afraid, and there are no guarantees. They deal with violence with the slightest hint of criticism; they break our camera, take us to the intelligence office, and beat us" (Participant 13).

In another example, an editor-in-chief of a local radio station in the western province reported his experience when he was beaten by the Taliban as follows:

"After broadcasting a news report, I was threatened and warned several times by the Taliban for false reasons, and the Taliban beat me, and one of my employees was slapped by the Taliban many times. We do not dare to make it public because we might lose our lives" (Participant 21).

4. Financial Pressures on Media

The Taliban government has put notable economic and financial pressure on those media outlets that they cannot completely capture. According to the study findings, financial problems are one of the biggest challenges facing media outlets under Taliban rule. This study reveals that since the Taliban returned to power, almost half of Afghanistan's media outlets were shut down due to financial and economic problems. The media currently operating are struggling with the financial crisis. In the last two decades, Afghan media was typically financially supported by international donors, commercial advertisements, and the government's public announcements. Although the gradual loss of international support for Afghan media started during the republic government, according to the study's findings, since the Taliban came to power, most of the media lost their funds and their financial models. When talking about how the Taliban have caused the financial crisis of the media outlets, almost all interviewees highlight that the Taliban's policies on "how to broadcast advertisements," "censoring and banning revenue-generating programs," "increasing heavy tax fines," "additional payments of media to municipalities," "inspecting media bank accounts," "stopping public service announcements" and "limiting international financial support" are the Taliban government strategies to put pressure and capture non-government media.

As mentioned by interviewee Participant 9, a chief editor of local television in the Herat western province, his T.V. station is going bankrupt due to the increasing problems and the pressures of the Taliban. He asserted:

"Due to the Taliban's restrictions on broadcasting content, the interruption of foreign aid, and increase in tax penalties and frequency license, our television income has decreased drastically, and all media are facing serious financial problems" (Participant 9).

According to the director of a local Television in Kunduz province:

"In a critical situation where there is no income, the Taliban's tax fines have been increased, and another license from the municipality has been added. We also have to pay money to the municipality" (Participant 16).

Moreover, the director of a popular News T.V. channel in Kabul noted:

"Due to the economic and political problems in the country, the commercial market is facing stagnation, and international financial support has also decreased drastically. Financial problem is the biggest threat to Afghan media" (Participant 15).

Furthermore, the director of a local radio station in eastern Laghman province reported:

"In the Taliban rule, it is difficult for us to pay employees' salaries and office rent and expenses. Our sources of income are extremely low, and we have had to lay off many of our employees" (Participant 20).

Another interviewee, who is the editor-in-chief of a local radio station in the southern province of Kandahar, mentioned:

"Private media have no sources of funding and were economically bankrupt. Heavy tax, license renewal tax, payment of frequency fee and increased electricity cost have faced them with increasing pressures and worries" (Participant 19).

Besides, this study reveals that the Taliban government has started auditing the bank accounts of media outlets and putting pressure on the media through the financial sources they have received. Talking about this issue, a director of a media support organization in Kabul pointed out:

"We received many reports from the media that the Taliban had inspected the bank accounts of several media outlets and demanded accountability from the media even for the income they earned in the previous government. We know that all this financial pressure from the Taliban on the media is only to close the free media" (Participant 23).

According to the study's findings, the financial crisis has put severe pressure on almost all media outlets, and this crisis has caused the shutdown of many media outlets and the unemployment of many journalists across the country.

5. **Media Ownership**

As soon as it came to power, the Taliban government completely captured the public/national media outlets to run their government's propaganda and appointed their senior dependents at different managerial and executive levels in these media, according to the study findings. These public media outlets include National Radio and Television channels, over 30 provincial radio and T.V., the Bakhtar News Agency, five government newspapers, and radio and television affiliated with the former House of Representatives.

For instance, a senior journalist who works for the provincial Radio and Television in Western Herat Province asserted:

> "Almost all our radio and television programs are focused on the policies and activities of the Taliban. Nothing against the Taliban's ideology is broadcast. We are completely under the control of the Taliban" (Participant 28).

Also, another interviewee who works for the Taliban-affiliated news agency Bakhtar News Agency reported:

> "In the public media, we became the propaganda machine of the Taliban. We have abandoned the principles of journalism, and based on the pressure of the Taliban, we are forced to be completely biased in our news" (Participant 28).

Furthermore, the study indicates that in order to balance the information flows and promote the state's political and religious propaganda, the Taliban's government and the Taliban-affiliated figures established several new media outlets after returning to power. Among these Taliban-affiliated media, we can mention "Al-Hijrah Radio and Television," "Shariat Newspaper," "Shafaq TV," "Al-Amara multilingual website enhancement," and "several stations of Taleemul-Islam radios." A senior journalist who leads a journalism support organization in Kabul noted:

> "The Taliban are promoting their media ownership by establishing new media outlets. Many media are now directly and indirectly owned or dominated by the Taliban" (Participant 33).

At the same time, the study reveals that although the Taliban have not directly taken ownership of the private media, the Taliban government bodies have imposed such restrictions

and Censorship on the private media that they have stopped their critical and investigative programs and severely self-censor.

Shutting Down Opposing Media

The closure of the opposing media is another aspect of the Taliban's attempts to capture independent media following the country's takeover on August 2021. According to the study's findings, in October 2022, the Taliban's government suspended the internet domain of the Hasht-e-Subh (8 AM) Newspaper and Zawia Media websites (CPJ, 2022; AFJC, 2022; IFEX, 2022).

Moreover, the Taliban ministry's spokesperson Anayatullah Alokozay mentioned in his tweet that these two news media shut down due to "false propaganda" against the Taliban.

> "The websites of Hasht Sobh and Zawiya News channels were closed by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. The websites of Hasht Sobh and Zawiya News, which had published lies, unbalanced reports, and fake news about the leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, were closed based on a decision"(Anayatullah Alokozay's tweet, October 03, 2022).

RSF (2022) called the closure of independent media under Taliban rule "marks the start of a new phase in the Taliban's war on media freedom" and regulations to restrict and censor the media." According to the RSF (2022) report:

> "The closure of the websites of Hasht-e-Subh (8 am) newspaper and Zawia Media is another sign of the Taliban's continued suppression of the media in Afghanistan. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) urges the authorities to reverse this decision as soon as possible and allow the media to continue informing the Afghan people about their basic human rights."

According to the study, the Hasht-e Subh newspaper and Zawia Media websites have been operating from exile since August 2021. Since the closure of their internet domain, these two news media were shifted to the new domain, which is currently not under the control of the Taliban rule.

Another participant who leads a media support organization in Kabul mentioned:

"The Taliban follow two major policies in media ownership. One is that the number of media affiliated with them is increasing daily with government funding. On the other hand, with pressure and restrictions, they are trying to close the media affiliated with political parties and leaders of the former government"(Participant 24).

This study highlighted that the Taliban government wants to capture all media outlets, even independent and private media. Therefore, with strict rules, intimidation, media crackdown, and imposing direct Censorship, private media cannot publish critical reports against the Taliban's actions.

6. Monopoly on Information

Information monopoly is part of the Taliban's attempts to control the country's information ecosystem. The study's findings show that the Taliban use different strategies to monopolize government information and state-affiliated media outlets, sharing the information they want with journalists and the public. Based on the research findings, in addition to heavy Censorship and cracking down on independent media, limiting access to Information, banning foreign media, and establishing the government-oriented commission for access to Information are the three main ways the Taliban rule to monopolize Information in the country.

Limiting Access to Information

Since the Taliban took over the country, limiting information free flow has been one of the Taliban's major attempts to capture the media and monopolize information in the country. In the first step, the Taliban canceled the access to information law and other media laws of the ex-government and extensively limited access to Information to citizens and journalists. The findings indicate that lack of access to information is one of the major concerns of Afghan journalists and media outlets under Taliban rule, which has caused the wide spreading of misinformation and disinformation in Afghanistan's information ecosystem. According to the majority of the participants, limited access to Information made it difficult to monitor the actions of the Taliban and hold them accountable for any human rights violation.

For instance, the director of a popular news T.V. network in Kabul mentioned:

"Almost all media, including our media, have three major problems regarding freedom of Information. The first problem is the lack of freedom of expression; the second is the lack of government's respect for freedom of expression; and the third is the limited access to Information. In most cases, Taliban officials are unwilling to provide Information to people" (Participant 15).

Moreover, the study finds that the Taliban's local authorities in the provinces are usually not allowed to talk to the local media. Several chief editors of local media stations in the southern and eastern provinces pointed out that due to the lack of access to reliable Information and the Taliban's widespread propaganda, they were forced to stop the newscast of their media. In an obvious example, the chief editor of a local radio station in the Nangarhar eastern province noted:

> "Taliban do not answer our questions, and there is no access to Information. They pressured us to broadcast the news from Bakhtar News Agency, affiliated with the Taliban government. So, we had to stop our daily news bulletins" (Participant 22).

A senior female journalist from Kabul mentioned:

> "We do not have proper access to the information; the Taliban officials deny it and do not provide reliable and immediate information to us. They said whatever they want, not what we want" (Participant 7).

Foreign Media Ban

Findings reveal that the Taliban's ban on foreign media outlets is another example of how information is being monopolized in the country, which has been systematically implemented in three steps following the Taliban takeover. In the first action, on March 28, 2022, the Taliban ordered local broadcasters to stop carrying news bulletins produced by the four international broadcasters, including VOA, BBC News, D.W., and CGTN (IFJ, 2022; VOA, 2022).

Regarding these restrictions, the head of a journalist association in Kabul mentioned:

> "We condemn the suspension of foreign media news broadcasts through local media, and this seriously violates international law and people's access to Information.
> "Unfortunately, the Taliban are hostile to domestic and foreign independent media" (Participant 31).

According to the study, in the second step, the Taliban banned the F.M. broadcast of two well-known US-funded radio stations, including RFE/RL's Afghanistan service Radio Azadi and Voice of America (VOA), which have broadcasting programs in Farsi and Pashto languages throughout Afghanistan in the last two decades (RSF, 2022; VOA, 2022; CPJ, 2022).

Abdul Qahar Balkhi, the Taliban foreign ministry spokesperson, noted in written comments to VOA as follows:

> "Afghanistan has press laws, and any network found repeatedly contravening these laws will have their privilege of reporting from and broadcasting within Afghanistan taken away. VOA and Azadi Radio failed to adhere to these laws, were found as repeat offenders, failed to show professionalism, and were therefore shut down" (VOA, December 01, 2022).

In the third act, the Taliban, on Feb 2022, blocked access to the Voice of America (VOA) 's and Azadi Radio's Persian and Pashto websites throughout Afghanistan. According to the Afghanistan Journalists' Center (AFJC)' statement, blocking the websites of these two radio stations is obviously "another sign of continued suppression of free and critical media, and they must cease censoring news outlets in Afghanistan and restore unfettered access to the websites of the broadcasters" (AFJC, February 15, 2023).

7. Expulsion of Foreign Journalists

The findings reveal that foreign journalists in Afghanistan have been facing increasing risks and severe restrictions. The Taliban regime targets foreign journalists who seem to produce critical reporting on the current situation in Afghanistan and have been accused of violating Taliban rules and publishing disinformation. According to the findings, following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, at least three foreign journalists were expelled from Afghanistan, and the Taliban prevented several foreign journalists from entering the country for reporting. Jagoda Grondecka, a Polish journalist; Isobel Jung, a British journalist and documentary filmmaker; and Lynne O'Donnell, an Australian journalist, are the foreign journalists who were expelled or forced to leave Afghanistan after the Taliban pressures and threats (AFJC, 2022; IFJ, 2022; RSF, 2022).

For instance, Lynne O'Donnell, an Australian journalist and columnist at Foreign Policy who spent many years as a resident correspondent in Afghanistan, was one of the foreign journalists expelled from Afghanistan in July 2020.

In an article on Foreign Policy, she wrote about her experience:

> "I left Afghanistan today after three days of cat-and-mouse with Taliban intelligence agents, who detained, abused, and threatened me and forced me to issue a barely literate retraction of reports they said had broken their laws and offended Afghan culture. If I did not, they said, they'd send me to jail" (O'Donnel, 2022).

In addition, Jagoda Grondecka a polish journalist mentioned in her tweet after she was expelled from Afghanistan.

> "Today, with extremely heavy heart, I left Kabul, my dear home for the last 2,5 years. What a privilege it was to spend there so much time. Now looking forward to new challenges & opportunities in Pakistan. It is sad to see how Taliban further isolate the country by pushing out foreign journalists. Credible Information from AF is more important than ever and in such short supply" (Jagoda Grondecka's Tweet, February 06, 2023).

Moreover, the directors of journalist support organizations in Kabul expressed their concern that imposing extensive and strict restrictions on foreign journalists is a part of the systematic attempts to isolate Afghanistan and control the narrative in the country.

For example, the head of a journalist support organization in Kabul mentioned:

> "The Taliban want to silence the voices of the people and try to prevent the reflection of the Afghan crisis, including the violation of human rights and restrictions on women at the international level. "Foreign journalists who came to Afghanistan have played a key role in exposing human rights violations by the Taliban regime" (Participant 31).
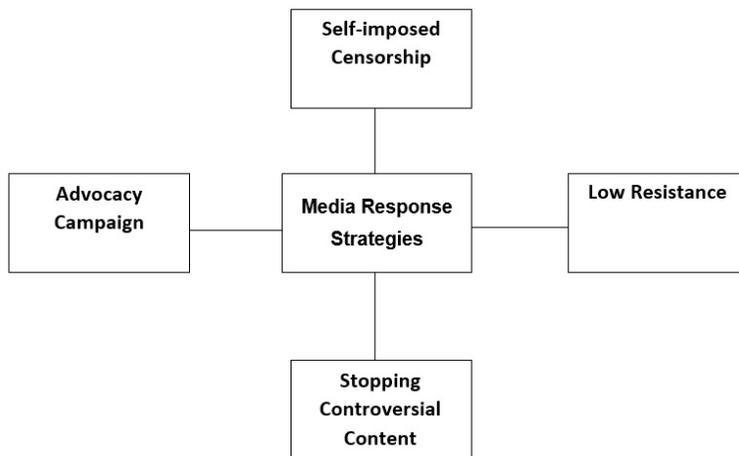
Several participants who were interviewed stated that the Taliban's attempt to expulse foreign journalists from the country would further limit access to reliable Information concerning human right violation and humanitarian disasters. According to the directors of two journalist support organizations in Kabul, the Taliban have "severely curtailed foreign journalists' freedom"

working in the country, "requiring them to have permission to report from specific areas" and "be accompanied by Taliban soldiers" (Participant 30, 32).

Q2. How do Afghan journalists and media organizations navigate and respond to the Taliban's policies regarding journalism and news media?

In this section, the strategies of journalists and media outlets in response to Taliban media capture will be explored. Findings reveal that the Afghan media community responds to Taliban media capture primarily in four main ways: self-imposed Censorship, low Resistance, stopping controversial content, and advocacy campaigns. Each of these response strategies is explained in detail below (Figure 3).

Map of Strategies derived from initial codes

Self-imposed Censorship

A considerable and common strategy of Afghan journalists and media in response to the Taliban's media capture strategy is self-censorship. Almost all the interviewees asserted that they had self-censor significantly in covering news to prevent possible threats and assaults from the Taliban. Several participants emphasized that their media under Taliban rule outlets are deliberately experiencing self-censorship at three levels: (1) "self-censorship in selecting the news topics and sources," (2) "self-censorship of journalists in how to cover," and (3) "self-censorship of the editorial team."

For instance, a senior journalist who leads a Radio and T.V. network in the northern province of Balkh reported:

"A phenomenon that has had a negative impact on our colleagues is the arrests and beatings of journalists and their imprisonment. We are very afraid of this issue and are worried about our colleagues' arrest. That is why we self-censor" (Participant 13).

An editor-in-chief of local television in a western province, Herat noted:

"We must self-censor some of our news and programs, and when the Islamic Emirate sets a framework for us, we must accept it. There is self-censorship among reporters and managers of our different television departments" (Participant 10).

A well-known female journalist who works for a women's news media mentioned:

"The Taliban told us not to publish much of the news. They said that if you publish, we will know how to deal with you. We also have to accept these limitations and self-censor" (Participant 17).

Moreover, another interviewee, when asked how you respond to the Taliban Media Capture strategies, noted:

"We have sensitive political issues that can cause security problems for our colleagues in Kabul, and we do not post on our websites and social media. Even in terms of literature and using words, we had to make changes so our reporters would not be harmed" (Participant 5).

The interviews data analysis shows that the Taliban regime's formal and informal regulations are so sweeping that journalists and media directors fear "arrest," "shut down of their media," "imprisonment by the Taliban," and "risking their lives." As a result, they are forced into self-censorship while accepting editorial Censorship.

Low Resistance

The study finds that if journalists and media outlets resist the media policy of the Taliban, they will face a severe attack from the Taliban, their lives may be endangered, or their media outlets may be shut down. Therefore, the mobilization of the media community against the policies of the Taliban is facing serious obstacles and difficulties. Media owners and journalists

do not resist Taliban orders due to vulnerabilities such as "financial pressures," "precarious working conditions," the creation of a 'legal vacuum," and "endangering their lives." Only a small number of those interviewed noted that they resisted the media capture strategies of the Taliban as much as possible. While a majority of interviewees pointed out that they are "forced to accept almost all orders and policies of the Taliban and do not resist much."

For instance, one of the interviewees noted that the Taliban are not good at talking and negotiating. They have their interpretation and do not accept any arguments. He stated:

"First of all, we try to discuss with the Taliban and give them satisfaction, but they do not accept. We have to accept what they say" (Participant 8).

Another interviewee from Herat commented:

"We accept some of the Taliban's orders, and some are unacceptable to us. For example, hiring female employees and using music with Islamic and patriotic content. Although they warned us, we do not accept" (Participant 28).

Another important aspect that the interviews revealed is that some Afghan media directors have created a self-regulatory mechanism in a legal vacuum to prevent any possible threat from the Taliban government and its possible challenges and concerns. Several Afghan media chief editors highlighted:

"We work cautiously. We know when the Taliban react negatively. We work in such a way that no harm comes to us, and at the same time, we implement our policy to some extent" (Participant 19).

"There are still pressures that women should not appear on TV. Why did you publish this issue, we had to accept some of their orders, but we also follow our policy" (Participant 4)?

"We do not deal with the Taliban, and we do not take a very serious stand. We try to act very impartially" (Participant 14).

Stopping Controversial Content

Controversial content includes programs such as music and entertainment, critical news, foreign series, and movies prohibited by the Taliban's formal and informal rules. It was a

recurrent theme in the in-depth interviews with key informants. Almost all the media managers in this study mentioned that after the Taliban came to power, they were "forced to ignore their [own] media policy" and "adjust their programs based on the Taliban's policy and rules." For example, the chief editor of a local radio station in the southern province of Kandahar noted:

"We cannot publish many issues. We cannot cover the issues of women, youth, children, and the disabled too much. We completely stopped playing music and critical news. Because we are afraid of facing a bad reaction from the Taliban" (Participant 18).

Moreover, a general director of a Radio and T.V. station in Balkh province highlighted:

"We do not have music, we do not broadcast drama and series anymore, we do not have interviews anymore, we do not have investigative reports, we do not have critical programs, and we do not have entertainment programs. What remains except that we are a preacher and speakers of a regime." (Participant 14).

Another interviewee from Badghis province reported:

"Due to the fear of arresting my colleagues and the closure of our media by the Taliban, we stopped broadcasting political and critical news. We cannot publish news that shows the weakness of the Taliban government" (Participant 2).

In the meantime, a senior journalist who works for an online media noted:

"We decided to focus only on news and news report. We no longer publish articles and political analysis" (Participant 6).

Overall, the data collected revealed that several local and national media, to stay safe from the Taliban's media capture, have increased the production and broadcasting of religious and Islamic programs through their media instead of entertainment and music programs.

Advocacy Campaigns

This study indicates that launching advocacy campaigns to follow up on the challenges of journalists under the Taliban regime has been one of the dynamic activities of media and journalist support institutions in the last year. A variety of perspectives were expressed about advocacy activities such as "drawing international attention to the situation of Afghan media,"

"attempts to free imprisoned journalists," "convincing the Taliban to respect media freedom," and "conducting research regarding journalism under the Taliban rule."

For instance, the head of a journalism support organization in Kabul asserted:

> "We at media active organizations in Kabul hold regular advocacy meetings with senior Taliban officials and share the problems of the media and journalists with the Taliban government to solve these problems" (Participant 24).

Another interviewee, who is the director of a national news network in Kabul, commented:

> "We, the heads of the media outlets in Kabul, have discussed with the Taliban authorities many times to respect the freedom of the media, but they say that the activities of the media should be within the framework of Islam. However, they do not provide any definition of Islamic principles" (Participant 4).

Another important aspect that the interviews revealed is advocacy for creating a specific law and regulation to support media and journalists in Afghanistan. For example, an interviewee mentioned:

> "We had regular dialogue with Taliban officials to set a legal framework for journalism and media in Afghanistan, but they say the previous media law is enforceable. Unfortunately, none of the provisions of this law are implemented" (Participant 33).

A senior journalist from Kandahar Province reported:

> "Some time ago, we did a campaign where all the employees and officials of the radio stations had their mouths taped shut, and we published the photo on social media. We have shown that we are limited and that our profession is under torture and threats. We strive to be consistent" (Participant 18).

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

The data analysis reveals that the Taliban government has used intentional and direct multifaceted strategies to capture media in Afghanistan since coming to power in August 2021 to legitimize their rule and control the narrative in the media. These seven strategies include Regulatory Interference, Criminal Prosecution of Journalists, Suppression of Journalists, Financial Pressures on Media, Media Ownership, The Monopoly on Information, and Expulsion

of Foreign Journalists—all employed systematically by the Taliban authoritarian regime to intimidate and exert control over Afghan media and journalists. The study finds that the Afghan media community, including the media outlets, journalists, and media unions, employed four tolerance strategies in response to the media capture policy of the Taliban government, including Self-imposed Censorship, Low Resistance, Stopping Controversial Content, and Advocacy Campaigns.

Therefore, the analysis shows that the strategies of Afghan media journalists face considerable challenges in navigating, let alone resisting, Taliban media capture strategies. According to the study, the capacity of the Afghan media community to mobilize against the Taliban's multifaceted media capture strategies is extremely low and inefficient due to the severe repression and extensive violence against journalists, financial crisis, severe censorship, and the Taliban's dominance over the media system. In other words, the study suggests that Afghan media and journalists have not been able successfully to mitigate or halt the Taliban's government attempts to capture the media. They've so far had to accept the Taliban's capture strategies and adapt themself to the new working environment.

This study analyses various levels of media capture in an Islamic authoritarian regime. It reveals how a media capture policy of a newly established authoritarian government brings a media freedom system under its control and is increasingly captured in a short time.

This article has argued that a fragile and unstable political and economic environment such as Afghanistan, as well as the financial crisis of the media, dramatically increased the media capture power of the Taliban authoritarian government, and there is a possibility of closing many other media outlets and becoming dependent on the ruling government. This finding suggests that the Taliban's media capture policy has reduced the pluralism and independence of the media in Afghanistan. At the same time, Besley and Prat (2006) highlighted that "media pluralism provides effective protections against capture" and "media independence reduces capture."

Overall, the results of this study are consistent with previous studies (Höglund & Schaffer, 2021; Simon, 2015; Coskun, 2020; Mabweazara, Muneri, & Ndlovu, 2020; Enikolopov & Petrova, 2015). Additionally, the results support previous studies (Pleines & Somfalvy, 2022; Corneo, 2006; Petrova, 2008; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Finkel, 2015; Yeşil, 2018; Pleines & Somfalvy, 2022; Somfalvy & Pleines, 2021). This study suggests that the Taliban authorities prefer to create a surveillance environment that not only severely limits the freedom of the media

but also suppresses and intimidates the media and independent journalists in various ways. However, there are no signs of the Taliban's desire to change their anti-media policies. On the other hand, with increasing pressures, threats, censorship, intimidation, and closure of the media, there are concerns that the Taliban's media capture will become more and even stricter.

Overall, these findings shed some light on media capture policy in the Islamic authoritarian contexts. The results contribute to understanding how media capture strategies work in an emerging Islamic authoritarian regime like the Taliban. Findings contribute to the existing knowledge and attempt to fill the knowledge gap in some critical ways. First, applying a qualitative approach presents comprehensive and in-depth Information regarding media capture policy in the Islamic authoritarian context and how the media sector resists these strategies. Second, the findings propose some novel insights and concepts to the current body of literature in the Islamic authoritarian contexts that previous studies have not appeared. For example, while the Taliban authoritarian regime has imposed heavy restrictions on the media and journalists, there is no specific law for the media system. As the current study highlighted, the Taliban regime captures media and journalists through a range of informal/verbal rules at the national level in light of Islamic principles and values which is slightly different from Coskun's (2020) study that focused on media capture in an authoritarian Islamic country such as Turkey. Although Turkey is an Islamic country, there are no signs of restrictions on media content such as music and entertainment programs as well as women journalists, however, t this study reveals that a part of the Taliban media capture strategies is focused on the prohibition of entertainment programs and extensive restriction on women journalists. Therefore, the other contribution of the study to the current body of media capture literature which specifically targets women journalists has yet to be explored in previous studies into authoritarian contexts.

This study found that women journalists navigated different environments in Kabul than in other provinces, which means that the Taliban regime prohibited the working of women journalists in many provinces. In contrast, women journalists in Kabul and some major provinces can continue their job. However, they have to follow severe restrictions, such as wearing a mask on air and working in separate newsrooms or offices where any men colleagues. Moreover, other novel insights of the study to the existing literature are media capture through a wide range prohibit programs in media, including the banning of music, entertainment programs, and some political content that is against the Taliban policies or promotes Taliban opposition groups.

LIMITATIONS AND NOTES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Although this study has addressed the research questions and provided useful and rich findings, several important limitations must be considered:

1. Due to limited access to journalists and media directors from all over the country, only thirty-five journalists interviewed were from the five major cities, which are the centers of each zone of Afghanistan.
2. Because of limited access to the internet in rural areas and severe Taliban restrictions, the researcher could not interview journalists and media directors from remote areas and districts of Afghanistan.
3. Participants were more male than female (of the thirty-five participants, only six were female), which could be attributed to the overall gender disparity in professional journalists and media leadership in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.
4. Due to the traditional aspects of Afghan society and Taliban restrictions, female journalists have a lower presence than male journalists in media outlets. It may have been related to the low response rate of female journalists during participant recruitment.
5. Since the qualitative data is not generalizable to the population (Hesse-Biber, 2016), the results of this thesis are specific to the context of the study. So these results cannot be generalized to other demographic groups of journalists and contexts. This limitation means that this study's findings need to be interpreted cautiously.

In addition, with such a significant shift in the local context, new research is needed to ensure how the media capture policy of the Taliban will continue and whether the media sector's response to the media capture of the Taliban will change positively in time or not. Simultaneously with the beginning of the Taliban's restrictive policies on social media, further research can be carried out on the Taliban's digital media capture policies in the new media digital environments.

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