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Afghanistan: Four men arrested over violence at Kabul women's rights march, say Taliban

Tuesday 7 September 2021, by [GRAHAM-HARRISON Emma](#), [HENLEY Jon](#), [MAKOII Akhtar Mohammad](#) (Date first published: 5 September 2021).

Spokesman says men 'mistreated the women and a reporter' but tells Afghans it is 'not a time for protest'.

The Taliban have arrested four men who hit protesters and held journalists at gunpoint to break up a women's rights' demonstration in Kabul on Saturday, the spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said.

The demonstration came amid fierce fighting in Panjshir valley, the last holdout of anti-Taliban forces from the fallen government, and as Afghanistan waits for the country's new rulers to reveal how they plan to govern.

A female police officer was shot dead at her home in central Ghor province, in a targeted killing in front of relatives, and relatives blame the Taliban, the BBC has reported [[1](#)]. It is the latest in multiple accounts of apparent reprisal killings across the country, despite Taliban promises that they would not seek revenge on former enemies.

Taliban efforts to shed their historic image of brutality and oppression, already badly undermined by an order that all women except healthcare workers should stay home from their jobs, was further dented by the violent handling of Saturday's protest.

Images of the bloodied face of one protester spread rapidly on social media, and other protesters said Taliban fighters used teargas and beat them with rifle butts.

The militants also forced foreign journalists covering the demonstration to the ground at gunpoint, and hit at least one before he was released.

Mujahid said four men who assaulted the women and journalists had been arrested. "They were from a checkpoint. They mistreated the women and a reporter from Al Arabiya. Police from the intelligence department came, put the situation under control and arrested them [the Taliban]," he told the Guardian.

However, he refused to guarantee a right to protest when asked if women could safely come out on the streets again.

"It's not a time for protest as [Taliban control] is new and all offices are closed. And we witnessed the airport explosions, insecurity will occur. They should be patient and wait for the government to established, then they can have demands. We ask people to not cause disruption for themselves and the authorities."

The Taliban have promised women their rights will be protected, but only with an Islamic framework

that they have not defined. "Since the Taliban took over, I didn't go to my office," said one protester at the Kabul demonstration. "I didn't try to go back to work, because they'll harm me if I do."

Rules for private universities seen by the Guardian require a segregation so absolute – including separate buses for female students, with their windows covered – that women's education is bound to suffer if they are implemented.

Farhat Popalzai, a 24-year-old student who went to the demonstration, said she was speaking for Afghan women who were too afraid to come out. "I am the voice of the women who are unable to speak," she said. "They think this is a man's country but it is not, it is a woman's country too."

The makeup of the new government remains uncertain, with any announcement pushed back until next week amid reports of heated disagreement between hardliners in the Islamist movement and those wanting to pursue a more inclusive line.

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, reported by some Taliban sources to be in line to lead the new government, told Al Jazeera the new administration would include all factions of Afghans. "The government will provide security," he said.

But in a reminder of deep-seated hostility, Taliban fighters have disfigured a mural showing the face of anti-Taliban figurehead of the 1990s, Ahmad Shah Massoud. They have blacked out the faces of women elsewhere and entirely painted over many murals, including ones promoting healthcare and warning of the dangers of HIV.

These have been replaced with plain black-and-white slogans. A Taliban spokesperson, Ahmadullah Muttaqi, said the murals were "against our values".

Massoud's son Ahmad Massoud is one of the leaders in a resistance movement, centred around commando fighters from the fallen government, trying to hold out in the Panjshir valley, north of Kabul.

It is the last anti-Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan after the group's lightning takeover of the rest of the country last month, and has a storied history of resistance through the 1980s and 1990s, first against Soviet forces, then against the previous Taliban government.

Now though, the valley is entirely surrounded, and supply lines that supported past resistance movements have been cut off. International observers have said the rebels' chances of holding out against the Taliban army, now lavishly equipped with weapons and ammunition seized from US-backed forces, look slim.

The Taliban have already pushed deep into the valley, although both sides made competing claims about their military success. A Taliban spokesman told the Guardian only the provincial capital and one district were holding out against their forces.

The newly formed National Resistance Front of Afghanistan said it had lured large numbers of Taliban fighters into an ambush in the Khawak pass, where many were slaughtered and vehicles and equipment abandoned.

In a Facebook post, Massoud insisted Panjshir "continues to stand strongly". Praising "our honourable sisters", he said women's demonstrations in Kabul and the western city of Herat showed Afghans had not given up on justice and "fear no threats".

But even if the Taliban can seize Panjshir and solidify control over the country, they will be strained

in government by a spiralling economic and humanitarian crisis.

Years managing an armed insurgency are little preparation for government, and the evacuations of the past few weeks represent a huge brain drain, recognised even by the Taliban.

Leaders have pleaded with Afghans not to leave, repeatedly offering an “amnesty” to those with government or military connections, although they have done little to convince educated women they will have any place in the new regime.

The major question now facing the international community is how much it should engage with a new regime, particularly for the US and Nato allies who have sanctioned its leaders and been fighting them for 20 years.

If Afghanistan remains as isolated as it was the last time the Taliban seized power, there are fears it could collapse, causing terrible suffering to its 38 million people and potentially allowing terror groups to use it as a base once more.

The regional IS affiliate behind the devastating Kabul airport bomb is thought to have nearly 2,000 members inside Afghan borders, even after years of heavy fighting with the Taliban and the US, and has links to other international terror groups.

The US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, was due on Monday to visit Qatar, which has for years hosted Taliban leaders and the negotiations with the US and other Afghan political leaders. They remain influential in Afghanistan, helping with the evacuation and now restoring Kabul’s battered airport to service.

Blinken will then travel to Germany to lead a 20-nation virtual ministerial meeting on Afghanistan alongside the German foreign minister, Heiko Maas. The UN secretary general, António Guterres, has also convened a high-level meeting in Geneva on 13 September to focus on humanitarian assistance for the country.

Emma Graham-Harrison in Kabul, **Jon Henley** and **Akhtar Mohammad Makoi**

P.S.

• The Guardian. First published on Sun 5 Sep 2021 13.22 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/05/taliban-break-up-afghan-womens-rights-march-with-gunfire>

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[1] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58455826>