



Afghanistan

A Country Report on People, Governance, Rights, and Crisis

Compiled August 2026 · Sources: UN, World Bank, OHCHR, UNICEF, Amnesty, HRW, RSF

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1. Country Overview & Geography

Afghanistan, officially the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, is a landlocked country at the crossroads of Central and South Asia — a land of towering mountains, ancient trade routes, and a people shaped by decades of conflict.



The Hindu Kush mountain range dominates Afghanistan's rugged landscape. Illustrative photo.

Afghanistan is bordered by Pakistan to the east and south, Iran to the west, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north, and China to the northeast. It covers about **652,230 km²** — roughly the size of the U.S. state of Texas — and is predominantly mountainous, with the Hindu Kush range dividing the northern plains from the southwest. Its capital and largest city is **Kabul**, one of the highest capital cities in the world at about 1,800 m elevation. [\[web-britannica-78ba364d\]](#) · [\[web-cia-d3ed54ab\]](#)

Key Facts

Attribute	Value
Official name	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
Capital	Kabul (metro pop. ~4.6 million)
Area	652,230 km ² (landlocked)

Government	Unitary totalitarian theocratic Islamic emirate
Official languages	Pashto, Dari
Religion	~99.9% Islam (Sunni ~89%, Shia ~11%)
Life expectancy	Women 67.8 yrs / Men 64.7 yrs (2024)

Source: World Factbook, Destatis country profile, Wikipedia. [\[web-theworldfactbook-20a98193\]](#) · [\[web-destatis-ab820e80\]](#)

Ethnic & Linguistic Composition

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society. While reliable census data does not exist, commonly cited estimates put Pashtuns as the largest group, followed by Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Dari (Afghan Persian) serves as the lingua franca, while Pashto is predominant south of the Hindu Kush. [\[web-df72df-df72dfb7\]](#)

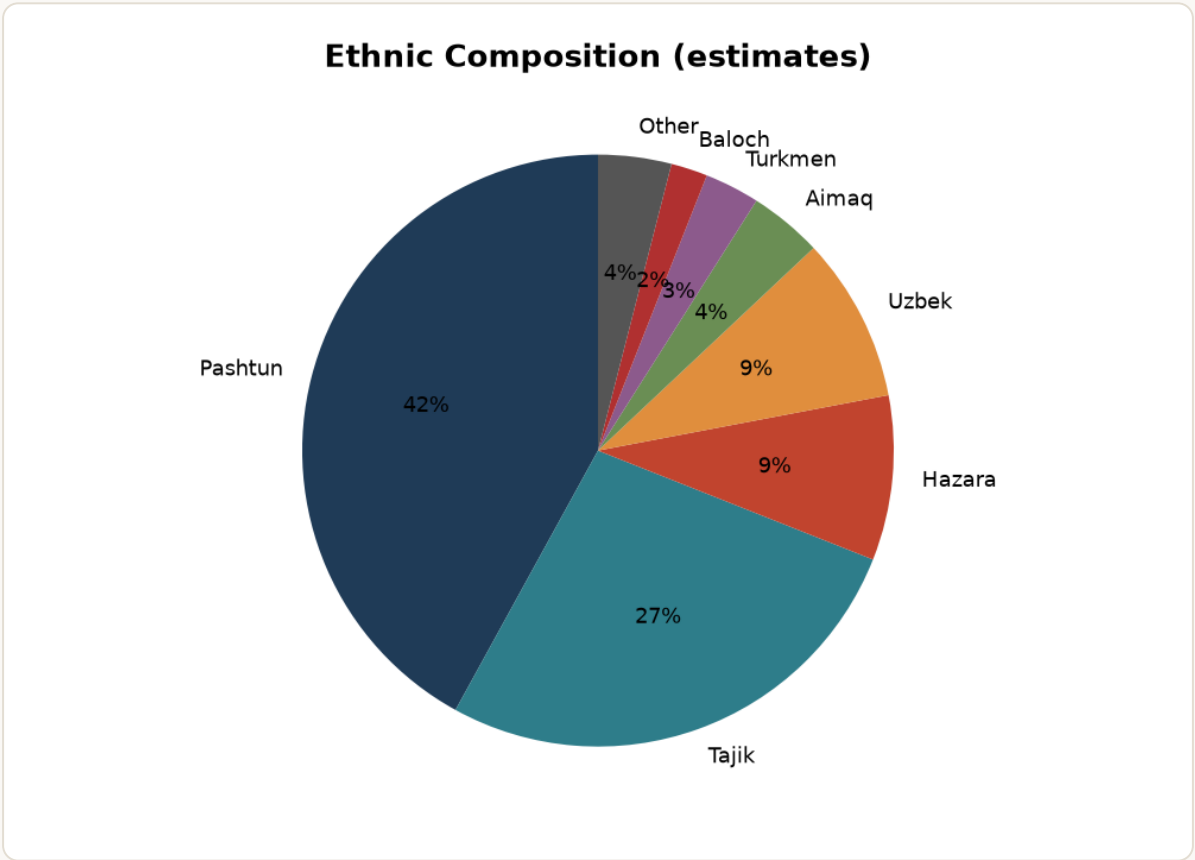


Figure 1 — Estimated ethnic composition of Afghanistan (unofficial estimates, ~2010).



*The Blue Mosque (Shrine of Hazrat Ali) in Mazar-i-Sharif, one of Afghanistan's most revered sites.
Illustrative photo.*

2. People, Demographics & Economy

Afghanistan's population is estimated at roughly **43.8 million in 2025**, growing rapidly in part due to the mass return of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan — nearly 5 million returnees since 2023. This surge has outpaced economic growth, eroding per-capita incomes. [\[web-ceicdata-8d7dc243\]](#) · [\[web-undp-91937a08\]](#)

43.8M

Population (2025)

\$448

GDP per capita (2025)

2.1%

Per-capita GDP contraction (FY25/26)

~28.9M

Subsistence-insecure Afghans (2025)

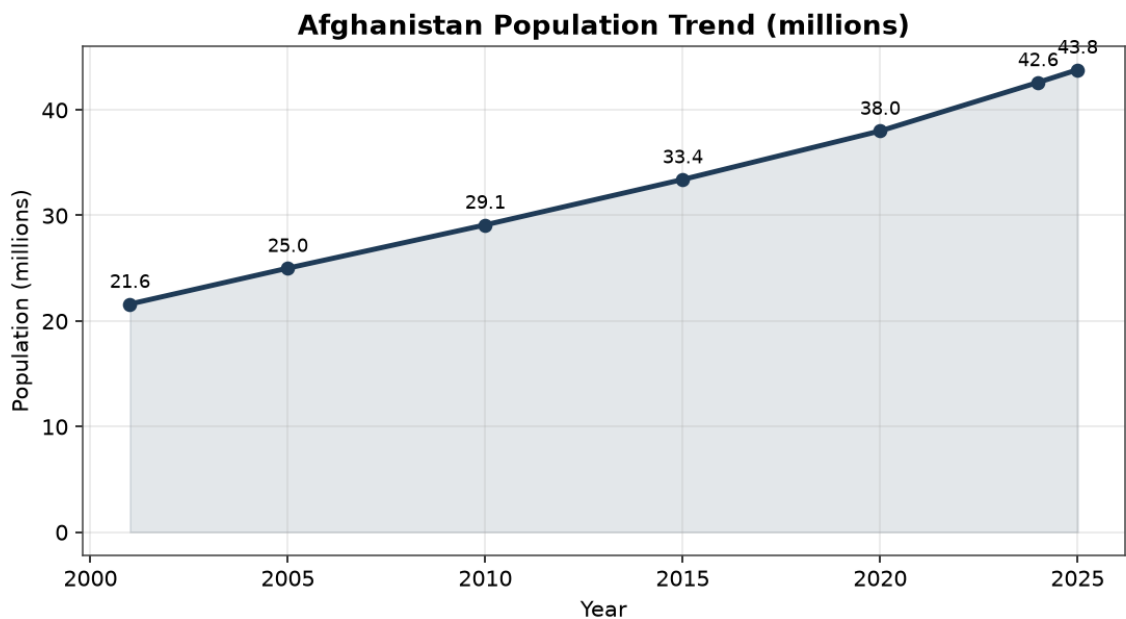


Figure 2 — Population has roughly doubled since 2001, reaching ~43.8 million in 2025.

The economy recorded modest real GDP growth of around 1.9–4.8% in recent fiscal years, but this is insufficient to keep pace with population expansion. Per-capita GDP contracted by an estimated 2.1–5.6% in FY2025/26. Chronic energy shortages, limited industrial capacity, and a contracting banking sector prevent private-sector-led recovery. [\[web-undp-91937a08\]](#) · [\[web-thedocs-06159597\]](#)

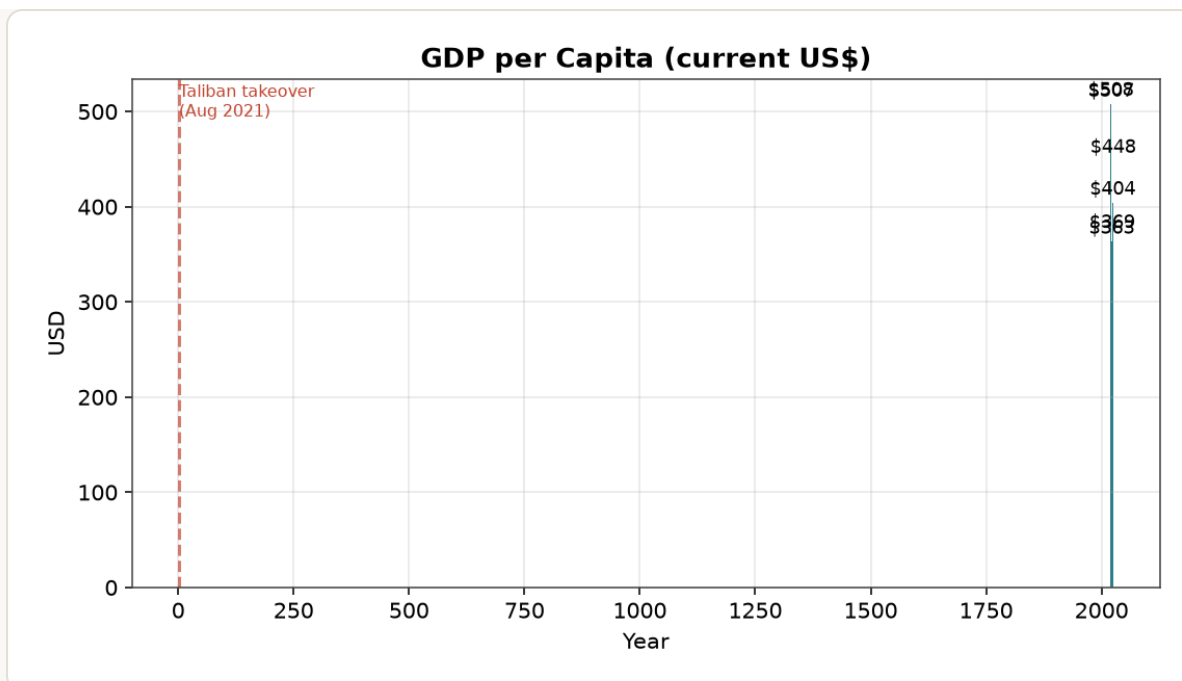


Figure 3 — GDP per capita (current US\$), showing the sharp drop after the 2021 Taliban takeover and slow recovery.

A widening gap

Rapid population growth — fueled by the return of millions of Afghans from neighboring countries — has diluted income gains. Per-capita incomes are falling even as aggregate output rises, deepening household poverty and reliance on negative coping mechanisms such as child labor and early marriage. [\[web-thedocs-a65d524b\]](#)

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3. Human Rights Situation

"Afghanistan's human rights situation continues to deteriorate dramatically." —
UN Human Rights Council, March 2026 [\[web-ohchr-532cc2c1\]](#)

Five years after the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the UN, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch all describe a human rights landscape defined by systematic repression. The de facto authorities have suspended the 2004 Constitution and the legal frameworks that protected fundamental rights, replacing them with a patchwork of

decrees and edicts based on their strict interpretation of Sharia. [\[web-amnesty-3351e796\]](#) · [\[web-hrw-d60848f4\]](#)

Documented Violations

According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), human rights violations remained widespread, including:

- **Extrajudicial killings** of former officials and perceived opponents;
- **Arbitrary arrests and detentions** — at least 389 documented between April and June 2026 alone, plus 65 incidents of ill-treatment by the morality police (Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice);
- **Torture and ill-treatment** in custody;
- **Corporal punishment**, including public floggings;
- **Systematic exclusion of women and girls** from public life.

Source: UNAMA Human Rights Updates. [\[web-unama-e9aa01d3\]](#) · [\[web-unama-693235f9\]](#)

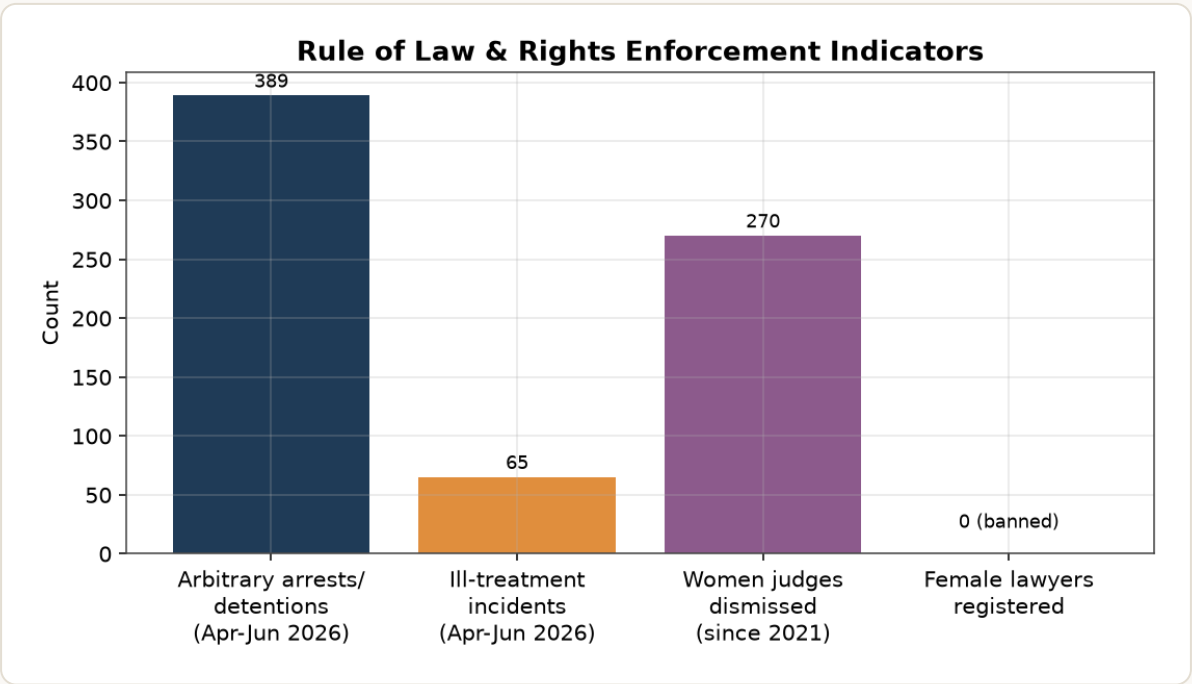


Figure 4 — Rule-of-law and rights-enforcement indicators. Since 2021, ~270 women judges were dismissed and women are barred from registering as lawyers.

Crimes Against Humanity & "Gender Apartheid"

UN finding

The independent UN Special Rapporteur, Richard Bennett, concluded that the Taliban's widespread and systematic deprivation of women's and girls' rights *amounts to crimes against humanity*, and that the term "**gender apartheid**" most fully captures the institutionalized nature of the abuses. On October 6, 2025, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a landmark resolution condemning these practices.

[\[web-nbcnews-38d235ef\]](#) · [\[web-jurist-aebc1eef\]](#) · [\[web-hrw-d60848f4\]](#)

The Humanitarian Dimension

The human rights crisis is compounded by a deepening humanitarian emergency. Large-scale cuts to international aid, the mass return of nearly three million Afghans in 2025, and ongoing drought have pushed more people into need. In 2026, an estimated **21.9 million people — about 45% of the population** — are projected to require humanitarian assistance. [\[web-ohchr-d3797901\]](#)

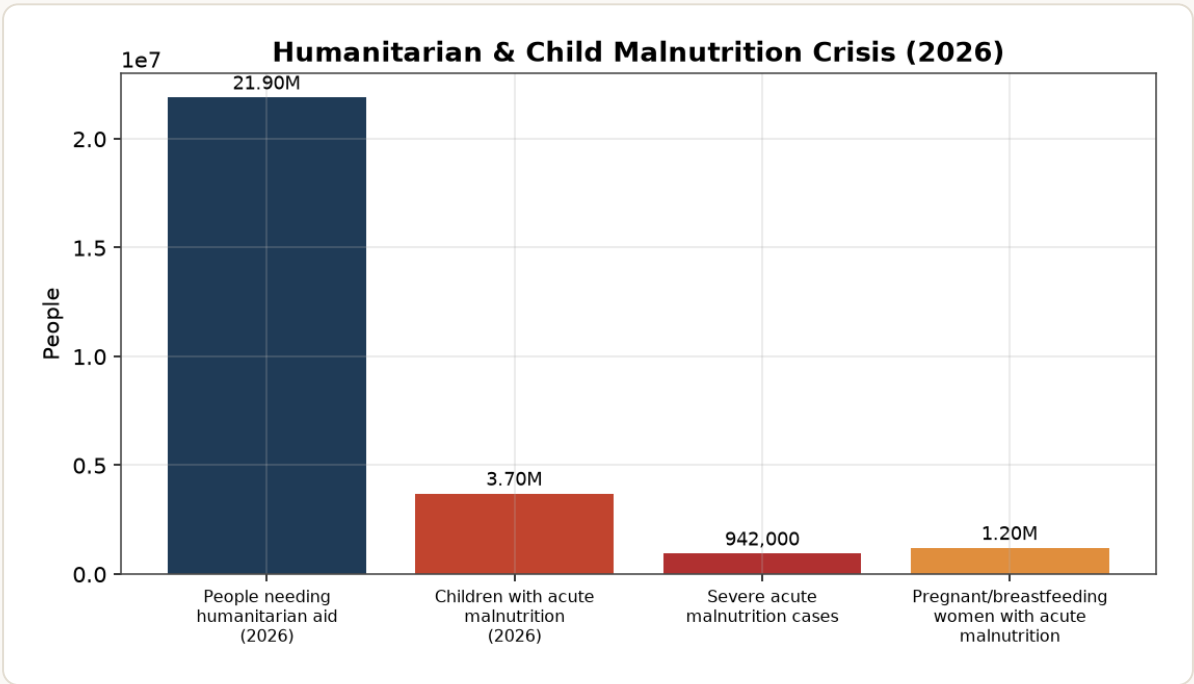


Figure 5 — Humanitarian and child-malnutrition figures projected for 2026 (log scale).



Afghan women in public life under the Taliban's restrictive codes. Illustrative photo.

4. Rule of Law & the Justice System

Since August 2021, Afghanistan's legal framework has been **entirely dismantled** and replaced with a religiously grounded system shaped by the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia. The resulting system is, in Amnesty International's words, "riddled with inconsistency, pervasive impunity and unaccountability; arbitrary, unfair and closed trials; and personal biases in the meting out of punishments such as public flogging and other forms of torture and ill-treatment." [\[web-amnesty-3351e796\]](#)

Key Developments

- **Constitution suspended:** The 2004 Constitution and laws protecting rights — including the landmark Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (which criminalized 22 forms of violence against women) and the Law on the Protection of Child Rights — are no longer in effect.
- **Judiciary purged:** All judges from the previous government were dismissed, including approximately 270 women, replaced by Taliban-affiliated men who often lack legal training and rule based on leadership edicts.
- **Attorney General's Office abolished.**

- **Women barred from practicing law** — there are no officially registered female lawyers, leaving women and girls with few safe channels to report abuse or seek redress.
- **10 laws enacted** so far, while many decrees and edicts are unpublished and issued verbally, creating a system lacking both consistency and legal certainty.

Source: UN Special Rapporteur report; Amnesty International; Centre for Democracy, Peace & Governance.
[\[web-ecoi-8efa5fbc\]](#) · [\[web-nbcnews-38d235ef\]](#) · [\[web-cdpg-ffe1ff08\]](#)

"Weaponized" justice

The UN investigator found the Taliban have "weaponized" the legal and judicial system to oppress women and girls, with the systematic dismissal of women judges and the abolition of protective laws removing nearly all legal avenues for women to seek protection or justice. [\[web-nbcnews-38d235ef\]](#)

The Morality Law (Promotion of Virtue / Prevention of Vice)

A central instrument of social control is the Law on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (LPVPV), which grants broad authority to morality police. UNAMA documented its enforcement through arbitrary arrests related to alleged violations of the hijab instruction (for women) and trimmed beards or "Western" haircuts (for men). The law also restricts media content and bans images of "animate objects," with severe chilling effects on press freedom and personal conduct. [\[web-unama-e9aa01d3\]](#) · [\[web-bpbuse2-ebd83013\]](#)

5. Women & Girls

Afghanistan remains the only country in the world where girls are barred from education beyond the sixth grade.

The Taliban have imposed sweeping restrictions on women's rights to work, movement, and participation in public life. The morality police have raided workplaces, surveilled public spaces, and arbitrarily arrested women for alleged dress-code violations. Women have been removed from the civil service payroll (as of January 2026), and since September 2025,

Afghan women — including UN staff — have been barred from entering UN premises nationwide. [【web-hrw-d60848f4】](#) · [【web-unama-ada91a15】](#)

Education

- An estimated **3.8 million girls aged 7–18** are currently out of school, including more than 2.6 million adolescent girls.
- Each year, approximately **250,000 more girls** are permanently excluded from secondary education pathways.
- If the ban continues until 2030, more than **2 million girls** will have been deprived of education beyond primary school.
- The number of female teachers in basic education has declined by over 9%, from ~73,000 in 2022 to ~66,000 in 2024.

Source: UNESCO; UNICEF; UN. [【web-unesco-d59f4774】](#) · [【web-unicef-5e845dbf】](#) · [【web-thenationalnews-a5caaa8a】](#)

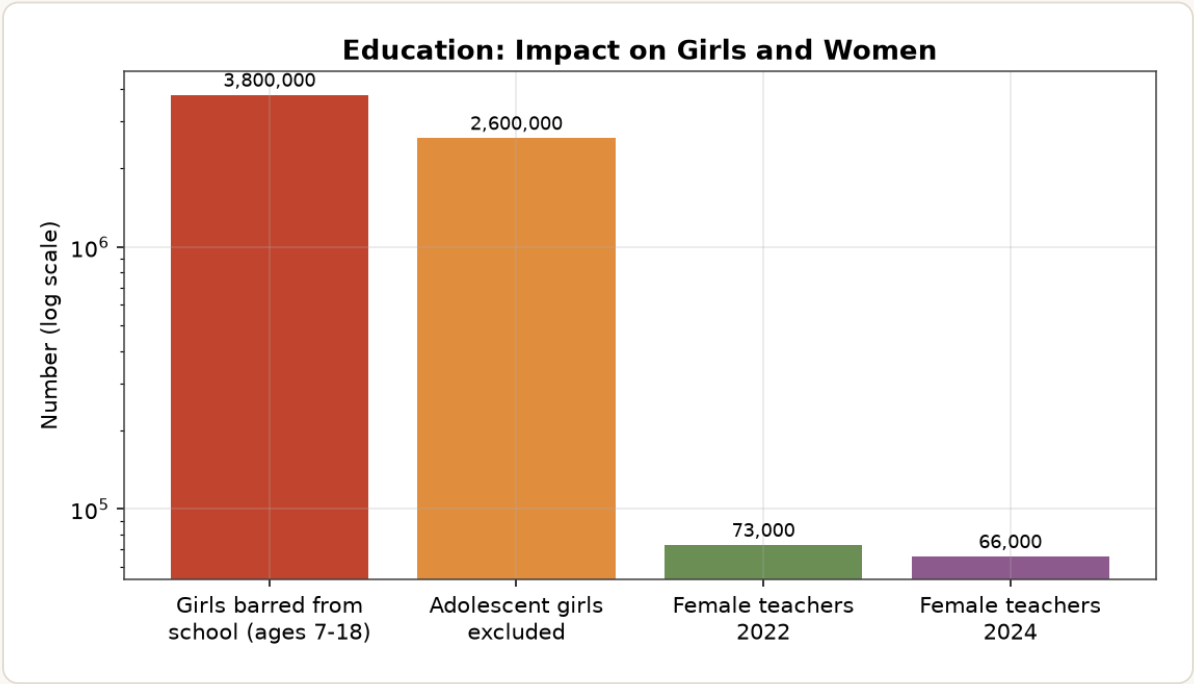


Figure 6 — Education impact on girls and women: girls excluded from school and the decline in female teachers (log scale).



*An empty classroom — a symbol of the millions of Afghan girls denied secondary education.
Illustrative photo.*

Health

The UN Special Rapporteur's 2026 report describes an escalating long-term health crisis. Taliban policies limiting mobility, education, workforce participation, and access to health services have intensified pre-existing inequities, "creating a self-reinforcing architecture of gender oppression that systematically undermines women's and girls' capacity to safeguard their health." UNICEF warns Afghanistan risks losing up to **20,000 women teachers and 5,400 healthcare workers by 2030** if restrictions persist. [\[web-ohchr-538ffe00\]](#) · [\[web-unicef-5e845dbf\]](#)

Economic Resilience Under Constraint

Despite the restrictions, female-headed households showed strong economic resilience in 2025, shifting to home-based production as a primary income strategy — though this came at the cost of more household members working and greater reliance on child labor. [\[web-undp-91937a08\]](#)

6. Children

Nearly 3.7 million Afghan children under five are expected to suffer acute malnutrition in 2026 — with about a quarter facing its most severe, life-threatening form.

Afghanistan's children bear the brunt of the intersecting humanitarian, economic, and rights crises. Malnutrition has reached record levels, child labor is rising, and the education ban is creating a "lost generation."

Malnutrition (2026 projections)

- **~3.7 million children aged 6–59 months** expected to suffer acute malnutrition (wasting).
- About **26% of these (≈942,000)** will suffer severe acute malnutrition (SAM).
- Children under two account for **83% of SAM cases** and 77% of moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) cases.
- An additional **1.2 million pregnant or breastfeeding women** are expected to suffer acute malnutrition.
- The burden of acute malnutrition for children under five **increased by 7%** compared with 2025 (SAM up 9%).

Source: IPC Acute Malnutrition Analysis; UNICEF; ReliefWeb. [【web-reliefweb-c70f4df0】](#) · [【web-reliefweb-74b90a6a】](#)

Food Insecurity

The 2026 IPC analysis shows a deterioration in acute food insecurity: the number facing acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) rose from 14.8 million to **17.4 million (36%)** for November 2025–March 2026, with Emergency (Phase 4) cases rising from 3.1 million to 4.7 million. By August 2026, the UN reported 14 million Afghans facing acute hunger, with only one in nine receiving WFP food assistance. [【web-reliefweb-635cc9d8】](#) · [【web-news-4e0eb5a1】](#)

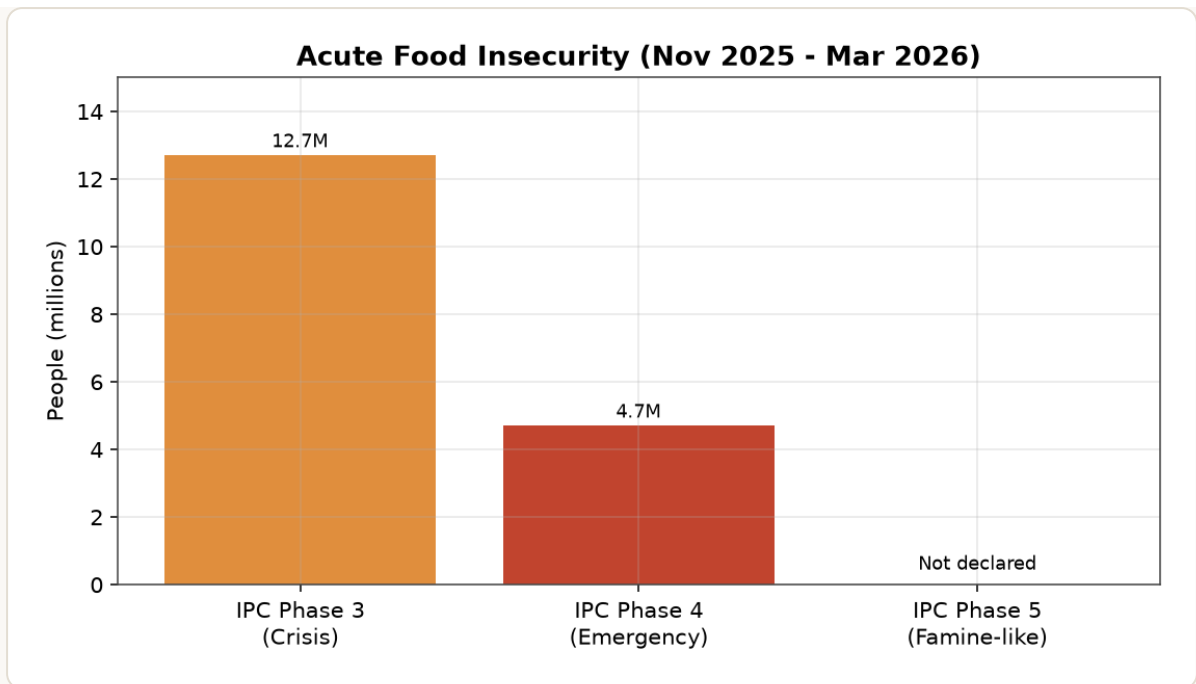


Figure 7 — Acute food insecurity by IPC phase (Nov 2025 – Mar 2026). Phase 5 (famine-like) has not been formally declared.



*Afghan children in a rural village. Millions face acute malnutrition and disrupted education.
Illustrative photo.*

Child Labor & Protection Risks

High unemployment, widespread poverty, and limited livelihoods force many households to rely on negative coping mechanisms — including child labor, early marriage, and reducing

the number and quality of meals. The suspension of the Law on the Protection of Child Rights (which had defined a child as anyone under 18) has removed key legal protections for children. Female-headed households, in particular, report higher reliance on child labor to survive. [\[web-undp-91937a08\]](#) · [\[web-reliefweb-e1f23ec8\]](#)

7. Freedom of Expression & the Press

Afghanistan ranks among the worst countries in the world for press freedom — 175th of 180 in the 2026 RSF World Press Freedom Index.

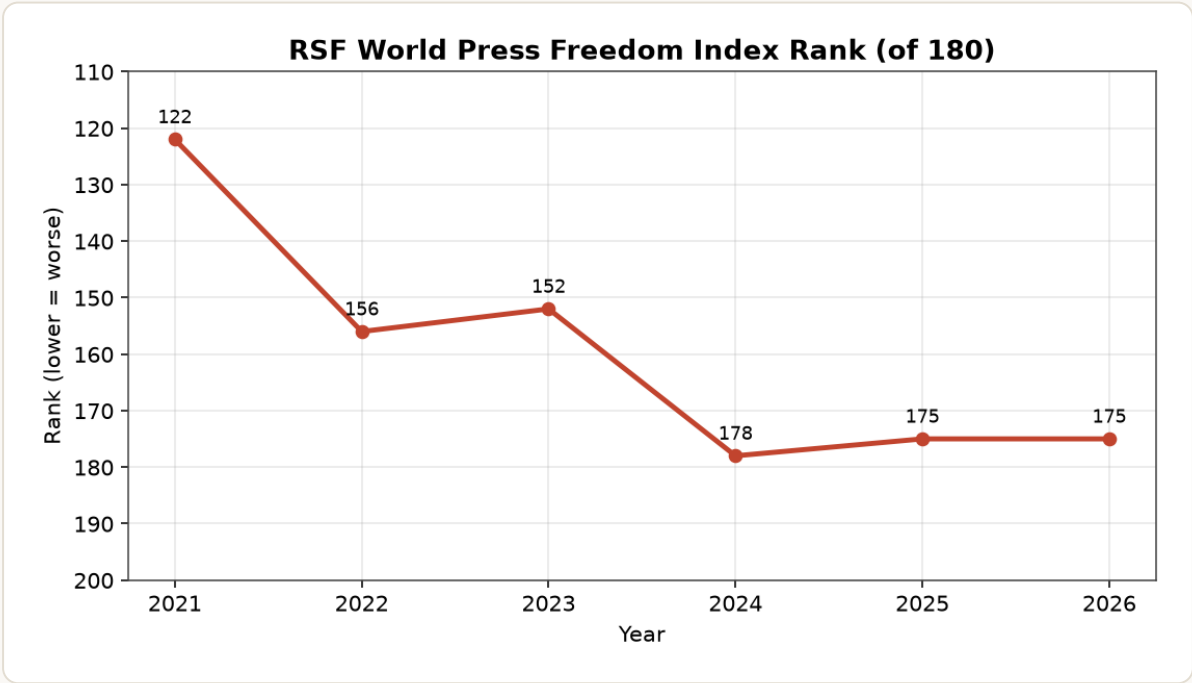


Figure 8 — RSF World Press Freedom Index rank (lower on this axis = worse). Afghanistan fell sharply after 2021.

Since the Taliban's return to power, there has been a deepening of restrictions on journalists, media workers, and outlets. The Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC) documented **at least 150 violations of media freedom** in the 12 months to May 2026 — including threats, arrests, censorship, and violence — reflecting what it calls "a deliberate effort to silence independent voices." The media landscape has become, in RSF's words, "decimated" and "devoid of pluralism and dissenting voices." [\[web-afjc-10ffd4cf\]](#) · [\[web-euaa-f24ab963\]](#)

How Expression Is Suppressed

- **Censorship & self-censorship:** A climate of fear has led to widespread self-censorship that extends beyond journalists to sources; Afghans who speak to media have faced threats, surveillance, and detention.
- **Arbitrary detention:** Journalists are arrested over various charges; in 2025 the crackdown intensified through forced confessions — described as an "unprecedented level of repression."
- **Legal restrictions:** The Morality Law (LPVPV) criminalizes criticism of public and religious figures through vague, ideologically defined terms, and bans images of "animate objects."
- **Directives over law:** Although authorities nominally claim adherence to the previous Republic's media law, enforcement is now governed by written and oral directives from Kandahar, fostering a hostile environment for independent media.
- **Women journalists hardest hit:** Female reporters face additional barriers under dress and conduct codes, and many have been forced out of the profession entirely.

Source: AFJC; OHCHR; EU Agency for Asylum; AP News. [【web-ohchr-9cad563b】](#) · [【web-ifex-c1841ff1】](#) · [【web-apnews-0e16e9d3】](#)

International obligations ignored

Freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ICCPR, to which Afghanistan is a state party. The de facto authorities' restrictions violate these obligations, denying all members of society — especially journalists — the ability to freely exercise this right. [【web-afjc-389d9cbf】](#)

8. Conclusion

Afghanistan in 2026 is a country of stark contrasts: breathtaking geography and deep cultural heritage set against a backdrop of severe economic fragility and one of the world's most acute human rights crises. Modest macroeconomic growth is being overwhelmed by rapid population expansion and the mass return of refugees, driving down per-capita incomes and pushing nearly half the population into humanitarian need.

The de facto authorities have dismantled the constitutional and legal order, replacing it with a system the UN characterizes as arbitrary, unaccountable, and — in its treatment of women and girls — amounting to crimes against humanity and "gender apartheid." Women and girls are excluded from secondary and higher education, the workforce, public spaces, and even UN premises. Children face record malnutrition and rising child labor. And freedom of expression has been gutted, with the press "decimated" and journalists subject to arbitrary detention and forced confessions.

The UN, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and UNICEF have all called on the de facto authorities to immediately rescind discriminatory decrees, restore women's access to education and employment, impose a moratorium on executions, cease arbitrary detentions, ensure fair trials, and reinstate a formal constitutional and legal framework consistent with Afghanistan's international human rights obligations.

Key Sources

Source	Reference
World Bank — Afghanistan Data	【web-data-b2cf02bf】
UNDP Socioeconomic Review 2024–25	【web-undp-91937a08】
OHCHR — Human Rights Council reports	【web-ohchr-11bfcd6】 · 【web-ohchr-532cc2c1】
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Amnesty International	【web-amnesty-3351e796】
Human Rights Watch	【web-hrw-d60848f4】
UNICEF / UNESCO — education & children	【web-unicef-5e845dbf】 · 【web-unesco-d59f4774】
AFJC / RSF — press freedom	【web-afjc-10ffd4cf】
IPC / ReliefWeb — malnutrition & food security	【web-reliefweb-c70f4df0】

Note: Photographs in this report are AI-generated illustrative images; charts are derived from the cited public data. Figures are drawn from sources published between 2025 and 2026 and reflect estimates and projections available as of August 2026.

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Data: UN, World Bank, OHCHR, UNICEF, UNESCO, Amnesty, HRW, RSF, AFJC, IPC · Charts & illustrations generated for this report.