

Afghanistan: Lost Progress

For decades, Afghanistan has been torn by conflict and war. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States and its allies began fighting the Islamist Taliban government and the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Until 2021, the U.S. and NATO tried to stabilize the country and build a democracy. Despite some progress, these goals were mostly not achieved: the country remained unsafe, and its economy did not develop as expected.

From 2015 onwards, the Afghan government, supported by Western forces, started losing control over more parts of the country. In 2020, the withdrawal of international troops was announced. Within a few months the Taliban took back power, capturing the capital city, Kabul, on August 15, 2021. Many people tried to flee, fearing persecution. Since taking control, the Taliban have severely restricted human rights, especially those of women and girls. Critics, as well as religious and ethnic minorities, are persecuted. Girls can only attend school up to the sixth grade, and women are banned from politics and many jobs. Their access to public spaces and their freedom of speech have also been greatly limited.

The Taliban have also heavily restricted higher education and research. Women are not allowed to go to universities or get higher education, and curricula and research are strictly controlled and censored. International cooperation in science is almost impossible, and many researchers have had to leave Afghanistan or can no longer work freely there.

Suhailah Akbari, a legal scholar, has also faced these restrictions. Before the Taliban's takeover, she advised the Afghan government and fought for the rights of women and girls, especially their right to education. After the Taliban captured Kabul, she and her daughters escaped to Germany with the help of the German Bundeswehr. Today, Suhailah Akbari works as a researcher at Humboldt University in Berlin, focusing on legal issues in international trade and renewable energy.



Listen to the podcast at
www.fragile-freiheit.de

As of: January 2025

Tasks

By scanning the QR code, you can access the podcast "Fragile Freedom." Listen to the interview and answer the following questions:

- 1) How did Suhailah Akbari manage to escape Afghanistan?
- 2) Why do the Taliban restrict the rights of women and girls, as well as education and research?
- 3) What does Suhailah Akbari hope for the future of Afghanistan?
- 4) What challenges does Suhailah Akbari face as a researcher in exile in Germany?

Sources and Further Reading:

- <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/nine-eleven-2021/336164/afghanistan-2001-bis-2021/>
- <https://www.bpb.de/themen/kriege-konflikte/dossier-kriege-konflikte/155323/afghanistan/>
- <https://www.unesco.org/en/emergencies/education/afghanistan>

Fragile Freedom: Academic Freedom at Risk

What is academic freedom?

Academic freedom means that teachers, researchers, and students can explore ideas, teach, and share their thoughts without the fear of being punished or silenced by the authorities. It allows them to study and discuss any topic freely. This freedom helps to make learning and teaching more open and encourages the discovery of new knowledge, even if it puts the current government in question.

In Germany, the freedom to research and teach is protected by the constitution and an independent judiciary and researchers themselves have a major influence on which research projects are funded. But especially in countries that are under authoritarian rule, this is not the case. Scientists that do not align with state agency are being silenced, threatened and persecuted in many parts of the world. Today, around 3.6 billion people live in countries where academic freedom is completely restricted. This is the result of the Academic Freedom Index, in which researchers assess the de facto levels of academic freedom across the world.

Academic freedom is at risk for various reasons. Often, governments or political parties want to secure their power and maintain ideological control by restricting and instrumentalizing science and education. Religious beliefs and economic interests can also lead to the censoring of scholars that oppose the

ruling powers. The restriction of academic freedom is often a gradual process – which can ultimately have fatal consequences for scholars and societies as a whole.

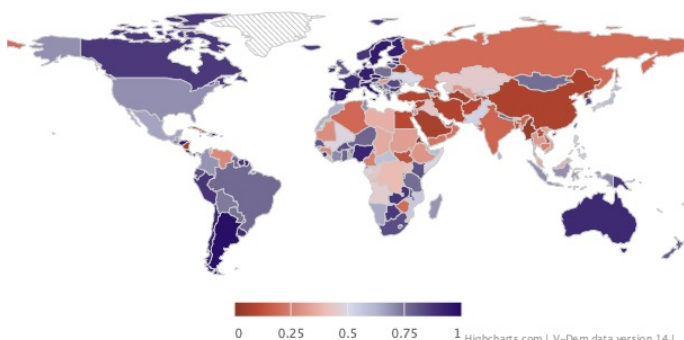
However: Even in democratic countries academic freedom is not absolute and always comes with certain responsibilities. Scholars must adhere to ethical standards, maintain academic integrity, and respect the rights of others. Additionally, while academic freedom protects scholars from undue interference, it does not shield them from criticism or debate. And of course, it is often politicians that decide on allocating funding to certain research programs.

The importance of academic freedom goes beyond schools and universities. It helps create knowledgeable and informed citizens, advances science and technology, and supports healthy democracies. By allowing free exchange and examination of ideas, academic freedom helps us search for truth and improve society.

Discuss in groups:

- 1) How could science be restricted or misused for political purposes? Imagine and discuss a specific scenario. This can be a fictional scenario, a historical or recent example.
- 2) Can you imagine situations, where it would be good for society to regulate and even restrict scientific research?
- 3) Optional question: How is academic freedom and the education protected by political influences in Germany?

Academic Freedom Index (2023)



Quelle Abbildung:

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard et al. 2024. "V-Dem Dataset v14" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds24>.

Spannagel, J., & Kinzelbach, K. (2023). The Academic Freedom Index and its indicators: Introduction to new global time-series V-Dem data. *Quality & Quantity*, 57: 3969–3989. doi:10.1007/s11135-022-01544-0