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February 28, 2026

New Regimes, Ancient Hunger: Women as First Casualty



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By Acharya Prashant



There is a question beneath the question whenever a society turns its full legislative attention to what a woman wears, where she walks, whether her voice may be heard in a public space, and how much pain her body may absorb before the law takes notice. That deeper question is never asked aloud, because to ask it would be to expose the one who is asking. The surface question is about morality, ord... 'sational continuity. The deeper

question is about what kind of mind requires all this legislation in the first place; what it is so afraid of, and what it so desperately wants.

We will come to that question. But first, the facts.

In the years before 1996, women in Afghanistan made up around 40 percent of the country's doctors, particularly in urban centres such as Kabul. They also held a significant presence in the civil service and formed the backbone of the education system in major cities. Under the first Taliban government, they were removed from all of these positions within months; windows were painted black so women could not be seen from the street; shoes that made sound were prohibited; a woman's laughter audible to men became a punishable offence. The Republic era that followed restored a portion of what had been destroyed: by 2021, 3.5 million girls were back in classrooms, over a quarter of parliamentary seats were reserved for women, and the 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women law had criminalised domestic violence and forced marriage. When the Taliban returned in August 2021, the dismantling resumed. Girls above sixth grade were banned from school, then women from universities. Parks, gyms, and bathhouses were closed to them. In 2024, enforcement of the Taliban's "virtue and vice" regulations extended to women's voices in public, treating even speech as something to be veiled. And in February 2026, the new criminal code repealed the 2009 law and replaced it with its precise opposite: a provision permitting husbands to beat their wives and children, provided no bones are broken and no wounds remain visible.

Rights granted, stripped, partially restored, stripped again. The arc alone is the argument, before any analysis is attempted. Whatever was built from the outside proved reversible the moment the outside changed. The question that arc forces is the one this piece proposes to examine: why is the woman's body always the first territory claimed when a new power consolidates itself, and what does that tell us about the nature of the power doing the claiming?

The Confessor's Logic

A society's legal imagination is its most honest self-portrait. Consider what the February 2026 provision actually reveals. The men who drafted it did not spend their legislative energy on agricultural policy, on infrastructure, on the country's severe youth unemployment, or on the widespread food insecurity affecting a large share of the population. They spent it calculating how much damage a woman's body may absorb before the damage becomes legally inconvenient. The bone must not show. Within these parameters, the beating is licit.

A government that legislates how much a woman may bleed is not protecting morality. It is revealing its fear.

What quality of mind produces such a provision? Not merely a cruel one, though cruelty is present. A mind for which the woman's body is the primary object of attention; a mind that, when it sits down to govern, finds the female body the most pressing legislative matter before it. This is not governance, it is confession.

Watch what happens when a man demands that a woman cover herself completely, that her clothing seal every surface from public view, that even her voice not carry beyond the walls of her home. He presents this as moral hygiene, as the protection of social order, as fidelity to divine commandment. What he does not present, because he cannot see it, is what the demand discloses about himself. If lust fills the eye, a wrist becomes a provocation; a strand of hair becomes a crisis requiring enforcement. The morality police who arrested Mahsa Amini in September 2022 for what they judged to be improper hijab were not enforcing some divine law. Amini died in their custody three days later, and her death set off the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement that continues burning through Iranian society. What those men were enforcing was the terror of minds that cannot encounter a woman without the encounter becoming, for them, entirely sexual. The veil is not placed on the woman. It is placed on the man's inability to see her as anything other than a body.

This is why the impulse, when left unchecked, never stops at clothing. The December 2024 ban on women's voices is the same logic carried one step further: if even a fully covered woman cannot prevent a man from experiencing her as a body, then her voice must also be silenced, because the voice is the last remaining evidence that a person is present and not merely a surface. The endpoint of this logic, followed to its conclusion, is not a woman who is modestly dressed. It is a woman who does not exist as a person at all, only as an object whose properties must be regulated.

Iran's trajectory makes the principle visible across a longer arc. In the years before 1979, Iranian women sat in parliament, managed government ministries, and comprised a third of the student population. Many of them marched for the revolution that would strip them of nearly all of this within months. They wore the hijab to those marches, not from religious compulsion but as a gesture of solidarity against a Shah widely understood to be a foreign-backed autocrat. The revolution promised dignity; within one month of its success, mandatory veiling was announced. In the early 1980s the minimum legal marriage age for girls was reduced to nine (in lunar years), and, with exceptions remaining, the right to divorce was curtailed, and the Islamic law that had guaranteed women

equal standing in custody proceedings was annulled. The women who helped topple one regime became the first significant casualties of the regime they installed.

Reza Shah had banned the veil by force in 1936; pious women who wore it from genuine conviction were traumatised by the compulsory unveiling. The Islamic Republic made it mandatory under penalty of imprisonment. The instrument of control worked identically in both cases, pointed in opposite directions. What remained constant was not the garment but the shared assumption of both the secular moderniser and the theocrat: that the woman's body is available for political deployment, that it is terrain, and that whoever controls it controls the meaning of the social order.

The Ego's First Territory

The woman's body is the ego's oldest possession. Before there were nations, before there were property laws, before there were armies, the female body was the boundary marker of lineage, of honour, of a man's legible identity within his community. Her control is not incidental to social order; it is its announcement. When she is controlled, the consolidating power has declared its territory. When she moves freely, the collective ego remains unsettled, for she represents the limit of its jurisdiction.

The unexamined ego consumes. It consumes forests, having stripped vast portions of the earth's tree cover. It consumes animals in staggering numbers. It consumes weaker human beings, which is what slavery, colonialism, and caste amount to when the ideological decoration is removed. When this same ego encounters a woman, it does not suddenly become considerate. The patriarchal itemisation of a woman's use-value has been consistent across cultures and centuries: her body's labour, her body's pleasure, her body's reproductive capacity. Japan's once-common phrase for an unmarried woman past twenty-five, 'unsold Christmas cake' to be discounted after the holiday, is not a Japanese peculiarity. It is the patriarchal ego stating, with unusual precision, what it has always believed: that a woman's value is her availability to male consumption.

The Taliban's February 2026 law is this belief written into statute, stripped of the cultural softening that other societies still maintain. The man who beats his wife without leaving visible fractures is not a criminal under that law; he is an owner exercising property rights. The law does not create this attitude. It merely stops pretending otherwise.

The Deeper Wound

Oppression becomes durable on

There is a consequence to all of this that is rarely examined with real honesty, because examining it honestly requires implicating not only the men who write such laws and the regimes that enforce them, but the women who have, across generations and cultures, participated in maintaining the very structures that diminish them.

When a society trains its men to see women exclusively as bodies, it trains its women to see themselves the same way. A young girl stands before a mirror and believes she is asking herself whether she looks good. She is not. She is asking whether she looks attractive to the opposite sex; the question has already been installed in her, so seamlessly that it feels like her own. She has lost her own gaze without knowing it, and she will spend years looking at herself through eyes borrowed from the street.

When the man treats the woman as a body, the woman eventually learns to use her body as currency. She discovers that male attention is the value the world has assigned her and she learns to trade in it strategically. Both the man who reduces her and the woman who adapts to that reduction are casualties of the same disease, confirming each other's imprisonment through the same transaction. The tragedy is not that she plays by these rules; it is that these are the only rules she was given.

Consider a parable: A shepherd was troubled that his sheep kept escaping. He gathered his flock and told them: you are not sheep; you are lionesses. We do not slaughter you here; we honour you, we protect you, you are sacred to us. The sheep, pleased by the elevation, stopped trying to escape. More than that: when one sheep, unconvinced by the parable, moved toward the gate, the others pulled her back. They reported her to the master. They said: she thinks she is a sheep; she does not understand that she is a lioness; she needs to be corrected. The master thanked them and continued his harvest undisturbed.

Across the world and across centuries, women have been told versions of this story. Your restriction is your protection; your dependence is your dignity; your submission is your spiritual strength; motherhood is your highest calling. The locked cage is less reliable than the cage the prisoner has been persuaded to love.

The women who marched for Khomeini in 1979 were not naive. Many were educated, politically aware, and genuinely opposed to the Shah's autocracy. But examining the ego-structure of the force they were empowering required tools of self-examination that their education had not provided. They were not betrayed by the revolution. They were betrayed by the unexamined ego at its centre, v had marched against, wearing a different flag.

In India too, the numbers are not distant. According to the National Family Health Survey, nearly one in four Indian women is still married before the legal age of eighteen. The pressure producing this statistic is not applied only by men. A girl in rural Bihar or eastern Uttar Pradesh is surveilled, shaped, and delivered to the marriage market by a community whose enforcers are often its women: mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, neighbours. No one polices the cage more efficiently than the prisoner who is persuaded that it is her natural home.

Research consistently shows that rights granted from above collapse easily when the granting power withdraws, while rights won through organised civil struggle prove more durable. The difference is not in the laws; it is in whether the people the laws are meant to protect have developed, through their own effort and understanding, the inner conviction that those rights belong to them. External liberation without inner transformation will always be reversible. Afghanistan's arc from 1996 to 2026 is probably the most compressed available proof of what that means in practice.

What Must Change, and Where

This is where most commentary on the Taliban's 2026 law will stop: with condemnation and calls for pressure. Necessary, yes. Sufficient, no.

The Taliban's most strategically significant act since their return is not the February 2026 beatings provision. It is the ban on girls' secondary education. A woman who can read a legal text, earn independently, and examine the terms of her own existence cannot ultimately be governed by a law that requires her silence and her pain. She can be coerced; she can be imprisoned; she can be killed. But she cannot be made to believe her cage is a palace. And it is precisely that belief, not the bars, that the system requires for its stability.

The Upanishadic tradition understood something about women that much later religiosity forgot. Gargi debated Yajnavalkya before the full assembly at Janaka's court. Maitreyi refused wealth and asked instead for knowledge. Nowhere in that tradition does inquiry pause to inspect a woman's clothing. The concern was not her body, but her consciousness. That tradition too was later enclosed by the same social forces it had once dissolved; the insight survived in texts while the world outside the texts remained largely the same.

Kerala demonstrates, in figures, what this looks like when education approaches that spirit. Its total fertility rate has fallen below replacement level, its women are among the most educated in South Asia; and its patriarchal structures though far from absent, are categorically different from the rate remains around 3, and child

marriage rates are among the highest in the country. More than men, it is a difference in what women have been enabled to see and claim.

The question the Taliban's February 2026 law raises is ultimately not only political. It is civilisational: what quality of consciousness produces such an act, and what would have to change, not merely in law but in the human being, for such an act to become genuinely unthinkable?

It is addressed to the woman reading this who recognises, in some version of the pattern described here, something of her own life. Not as a verdict on her past, but as an invitation. The cage was built from the outside, but the belief that makes it hold was installed from within, and while others may point to the door, the step across the threshold belongs to no one but her.

Others will free you only to the edge of their own understanding. Beyond that edge, you must see for yourself.

Liberation is not given. One arrives at it by honest seeing.

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