

The Taliban's perversion of sharia law

[Houriya Ahmed](#)

The Taliban have perverted sharia law in a way that shames Islam and contravenes human rights

In the Malakand region of Pakistan, the Taliban have started correcting the "moral wrongs" of society by banning women from shopping in public areas, as it is believed to be obscene. They have punished men by shaving their hair and moustaches for [listening to music](#), seen as un-Islamic. As non-Muslims living under sharia law, the Sikh community in [Orakzai Agency](#) is being forced to pay 15m rupees, approximately £130,000, in tax to live in peace. If Sikhs refuse, then the Taliban will occupy their properties.

The Taliban are, of course, not the first to attempt to implement sharia law. Governments in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Taliban-ruled [Afghanistan](#) and northern Nigeria have implemented "Islamic" laws that have resulted in systematic human rights abuses by employing medieval punishments for transgressing God's "boundaries", such as death for apostasy and stoning for adultery. The implementation of such sharia laws leads people to question the compatibility of Islam and human rights.

Muslims who want to lead a life based on God's guidance from the Quran and Sunnah (Prophetic tradition) comply with sharia, which literally means "way", not law. Central to sharia are the aims of preserving life, property, intellect, progeny and religion. Going against this traditional understanding, extreme elements like the Taliban incorporate concepts of [state and law into sharia](#) by claiming that God's law is sacrosanct. Questions then arise as to who decides which Islamic [schools of thought or practice](#) are to be followed, and which criteria used to determine what is "Islamic" or not. When and where sharia law has been adopted, the tendency has been to force narrow and backward opinions upon society, in contravention of sharia's aims as well as human rights standards.

If the Taliban were to contextualise the Qur'an and Sunnah, they would realise that Islam's Prophet Muhammad aimed to reform 7th-century Arab society by giving women and weaker groups greater rights and relative equality. For instance, women were granted rights to hold property and slavery was discouraged. Whilst maintaining sharia as a set of norms, bearing in mind that it is not God but humans who legislate, Islamic practices can be [re-interpreted to meet today's moral standards](#), where freedom and equality can and should form the basis of sharia principles. To legislate and structure society based on medieval rules and norms now actually contradicts Muhammad's message, which is to avoid tyranny, oppression and injustice.

Down the centuries Islam has maintained and promoted pluralism, which extremists like the Taliban deny. That is why we see such a diversity of Muslim practice today, because Islamic scholars have understood that the eternal message of God needs to be interpreted in reference to geographical and temporal contexts. By legalising a twisted understanding of sharia, the [Taliban](#) are actually politicising religion.

There is nothing un-Islamic in allowing individuals to follow and practice Islam as they choose [without it being incorporated as state law \(pdf\)](#). Muslims in Malakand should be able

to choose freely how to follow Islam out of personal conviction, regardless of whether their interpretations conform to majority or minority opinion. They should be allowed to believe that listening to music is not un-Islamic; that women can shop in public without wronging Islam; and that Sikhs should be protected based on common nationality, not religion.

The Pakistani government has made itself responsible for the human rights abuses committed by the Taliban by [formalising](#) its interpretation of sharia law. It is a moral imperative to challenge such laws that discriminate along sectarian religious lines.