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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today expressed concern that the lower house of the Tajik parliament has adopted further overly broad restrictive measures on religion. State-imposed restrictions on religious activity have been steadily increasing in recent years, as documented in the May USCIRF Annual Report.

On June 15, Tajikistan's Parental Responsibility Law was approved by the lower house of parliament. Under the draft law, only children enrolled in state-approved institutes of religious education can participate in religious activity. The parliament refused to consider a proposal from the Islamic Renaissance Party that children be allowed to attend religious education after school.

The Tajik president initiated the draft Parental Responsibility Law in April, now under consideration by parliament. Several provisions of the draft Parental Responsibility Law violate the Tajik Constitution and international human rights standards. Article 8 obliges parents not to allow their children to take part in any organized religious activities except funerals. The draft law reinforces the country's harsh 2009 Religion Law and also imposes new restrictions, including on religious education and dress. Local religious communities, independent legal experts and human rights defenders have condemned the draft law.

The lower house of parliament also passed on June 15 new Criminal Code amendments that punish those who organize unapproved religious meetings of any religious denomination and impose harsh prison terms for undefined "religious extremist" teaching.

"USCIRF is very concerned about these troubling developments and urges the U.S. government to further press President Rakhmon to see these changes are not enacted," said USCIRF Chairman Leonard Leo. "If made law, these provisions would accelerate the decline of the status of freedom of religion or belief in Tajikistan."

USCIRF again decided to maintain Tajikistan on its Watch List in 2011. Tajikistan has been on the Commission's Watch List since 2009. Conditions in Tajikistan are close to meeting the statutory standard for a "country of particular concern" which would allow for various Presidential actions, including sanctions, to address such violations.

The Tajik government faces genuine terrorist threats, but Tajik laws on religion are overly broad and restrict freedom of religion or belief. While the Tajik government claims the law under consideration is largely motivated by concerns about terrorism, the Tajik authorities also continue their attacks on non-violent religious communities. In mid-June, a Muslim cleric was detained in the Rudaki district on suspicion of illegal religious instruction to a group of people including five minors aged nine to 17. An unregistered mosque in the southern Khatlon Region was demolished and a Baptist church which had been denied registration was shut down. Many mosques and other places of worship have been closed down and some have been destroyed.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

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