

# TAJIKISTAN

## U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

**Bottom Line:** The Tajik government suppresses all religious activity independent of state control, particularly the activities of Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The government also imprisons individuals on unproven criminal allegations linked to Islamic religious activity and affiliation.

Tajikistan's restrictions on religious freedom remained in place in 2012, and systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief continue. The government suppresses and punishes all religious activity independent of state control, and imprisons individuals on unproven criminal allegations linked to religious activity or affiliation. These restrictions and abuses primarily affect the country's majority Muslim community, but also target minority communities, particularly Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Jehovah's Witnesses community has been banned since 2007. In recent years, the Tajik government has destroyed a synagogue, a church, and three mosques, and it has closed down hundreds of unregistered mosques.

Based on these systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again recommends in 2013 that Tajikistan be designated as a country of particular concern (CPC). USCIRF first recommended that Tajikistan be designated a CPC in 2012. Previously, Tajikistan had been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2009.

### **Background**

The government's recent actions against peaceful religious practice are based on an expansion over the past four years of repressive laws limiting religious freedom. The 2009 religion law establishes onerous and intrusive registration requirements for religious groups; criminalizes unregistered religious activity as well as private religious education and proselytism; sets strict limits on the number and size of mosques; allows government interference with the appointment of imams; requires official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign co-religionists; and imposes state controls on the publication and import of religious literature. In 2011 and 2012, administrative and penal code amendments set new penalties, including large fines and prison terms, for religion-related charges. In addition, a 2011 law on parental responsibility banned minors from any organized religious activity except in official religious institutions. Women are not allowed to wear headscarves in educational institutions, and men are not permitted to wear beards in public buildings.

### **Religious Freedom Conditions**

The government of Tajikistan enforces laws that curtail the freedom of religion or belief, especially for Muslims, but also for minority religious communities.

**New Legal Restrictions:** In 2011, administrative provisions added new penalties, including large fines, for religion-related offenses. The Tajik parliament also amended the criminal code and set maximum two-year prison terms for organizers and participants in "unapproved gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, pickets and street processions," which could include religious meetings. Another new criminal code provision punished the "organization of a religious extremist study group and participation in it without regard to the place of study;" alleged participants face prison terms of up to eight years; organizers face eight to 12-year terms.

**Restrictions on Muslims:** Tajik officials monitor mosques and their attendees for possible extremist and anti-government views; place restrictions on Muslim religious dress; control the age and the numbers of *hajj* (religious pilgrimage) participants; and indirectly control the selection and retention of imams and the content of their sermons. The government prohibits women from attending mosques or wearing headscarves in educational institutions, and bans teachers from wearing beards in public buildings. The Tajik government has

closed dozens of unregistered mosques and prayer rooms, and ordered the demolition of three unregistered mosques in Dushanbe, the country's capital city.

***Restrictions on Religious Minorities:*** In 2007, the Tajik government banned Jehovah's Witnesses for allegedly causing "discontent" among the people, and their conscientious objection to military service. Tajik authorities allowed the Ahoy Church to resume its activity in late 2008, but the Abundant Life Christian Center decided to close. Also in 2008, the nation's only synagogue, located in Dushanbe, was bulldozed. The Dushanbe Jewish community later received a building, (donated by Tajik President Rakhmon's brother-in-law, one of Tajikistan's richest bankers) which now is used for worship but is no longer the community's property.

***Restrictions on Religious Literature and Education:*** The government must approve the production, importation, export, sale, and distribution of religious materials by registered religious groups, thereby banning from publication religious materials that are not part of a registered religious organization. The Ministry of Culture has confiscated religious texts it deems inappropriate, including from Jehovah's Witnesses. A state license is required to conduct religious instruction, and both parents must give written permission for children to receive instruction. Local mosques are not permitted to set up educational groups; only central mosques are allowed to do so.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

Tajikistan is strategically important for the United States due to its long and porous border with Afghanistan to the south and the key role ethnic Tajiks play in that country. USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government designate Tajikistan a CPC and engage the Tajik government about the need to enact specific reforms. Based on these concerns, the U.S. government also should:

- Press Tajik officials and work with civil society to bring the 2009 religion law and other relevant laws into conformity with international commitments, including those on freedom of religion or belief, and criticize publicly violations by the Tajik government of its international human rights commitments, including those of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE);
- Continue to monitor the trials of those charged on account of their religious affiliation, and work with the international community to provide training for the judiciary in civil law and human rights standards; and
- Ensure that U.S. assistance to the Tajik government, with the exception of aid to improve humanitarian conditions and advance human rights, be contingent upon establishing and implementing a timetable for specific steps for the Tajik government to undertake to reform the religion law and improve conditions of freedom of religion or belief.

**Please see USCIRF's 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Tajikistan.**