UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: TAJIKISTAN

January 2022

Nadine Maenza
Chair

Nury Turkel
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Anurima Bhargava

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

Khizr Khan

Sharon Kleinbaum

Tony Perkins

Erin D. Singshinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom in Tajikistan in 2021

Introduction

Since 2009, Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon, has defined and heavily regulated what is deemed acceptable Islamic practice, subordinating Islamic institutions to the regime and imprisoning independent clerics, political opponents, and secular critics as "extremists" and "terrorists." The imminent challenge posed by the Taliban's rapid takeover in neighboring Afghanistan, upon the U.S. withdrawal, threatens to accelerate this trend and diminishes the potential for Tajikistan to reevaluate religious freedom restrictions.

The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief had planned to visit Tajikistan in fall 2021 as part of a potential dialogue on religious freedom issues but canceled his visit after failing to receive the promised official invitation. Tajikistan's intention to bring its legislation regulating the practice of religion "in full compliance with international standards" by 2030, as outlined in a draft national strategy, is uncertain given the current trajectory.

While developments in Afghanistan impact the entire region, they are particularly salient for Tajikistan, which shares strong cross-border connections with ethnic Tajiks. Ethnic Tajiks represent the second-largest group in Afghanistan, with *estimates* ranging between 25 and 46 percent of the population, meaning there are more ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan than there are in Tajikistan. Unlike most of its neighbors, Tajikistan has been extremely critical of the Taliban and refuses to recognize it as a legitimate government until the Taliban includes a representative proportion of Tajiks. This report explains how recent events in Afghanistan impact its northern neighbor and provides an update on Tajikistan's religious freedom record in 2021.

Background

While Rahmon deserves credit for standing up to the Taliban when so many regional leaders have acquiesced to its rule, his own government is no example of inclusivity. In 2015, Tajikistan banned the moderate Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which represented the only effective opposition in the country, and reneged on the 1997 peace deal that gave 30 percent of government positions to representatives of the United Tajik Opposition after five years of civil war.

Despite a lack of evidence, and strong *objections* from the United States and the international community, Rahmon's regime claimed the increasingly popular IRPT intended to seize the government by force. Since 2015, Tajikistan has imprisoned IRPT members en masse, with prominent leaders dying in prison under suspicious circumstances, and many more forced to flee the country.

www.USCIRF.gov
@USCIRF
Media@USCIRF.gov

732 N. Capitol Street, NW, Suite #A714
Washington, DC 20401
202-523-3240

The population of Tajikistan is around 86 percent Sunni, and there is a strong link between ethnic Tajik identity and the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. The government of Tajikistan is militantly secular, and the legacy of Soviet atheism is still strong, particularly in the cities. People may identify culturally as Muslim, but many urban Tajiks are not comfortable with the sight of bearded young men or of women in hijabs. The government leverages this anxiety to dominate Islamic practice and control the religious sphere.

In 2009, Tajikistan passed the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions, which set onerous registration requirements; criminalized unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and proselytism; set strict limits on the number and size of mosques; allowed state interference with the appointment of imams and the content of sermons; and imposed state controls on the content, publication, and import of religious materials.

Rahmon routinely uses the specter of extremism and terrorism to justify his monopoly on power and clamp down on civil society. Tajikistan has continued to crack down on individuals throughout religion, media, and civil society—all under the dubious claim of combating extremism. Tajikistan leads the region in imprisoning journalists for extremism, terrorist links, and inciting hatred, and targets those who document religious freedom conditions in the country, including government anti-hijab campaigns.

Tajikistan's use of terrorism and security challenges as justification for cracking down on non-violent religious groups undermines its ability to face legitimate threats, particularly the Taliban resurgence.

Cross-border Nationalism

Rahmon's political stock has risen domestically because of the crisis in Afghanistan. He has stoked nationalist sentiment by portraying himself as defender of the Tajik people and an enemy of Taliban-style religious extremism. On September 2, 2021, Tajikistan posthumously awarded two former Afghan political figures, Ahmad Shah Massoud and Burhanuddin Rabbani, with the Order of Ismoili Somoni—distinguishing them as *heroes* of the Tajik nation. Both men were ethnic Tajik leaders of the anti-Taliban resistance during the 1990s, and Massoud's son, also named Ahmad Massoud, led the last resistance to the Taliban in the *Panjshir* valley.

Massoud has allegedly relocated to Tajikistan and established the *headquarters* of "the Anti-Taliban National Resistance Front of Afghanistan" in the capitol of Dushanbe, although this has not been confirmed by the government or Massoud. On November 6, 2021, Massoud allegedly met with the exiled governor of Herat in Iran to consolidate the opposition to the Taliban and reiterated Rahmon's call for an ethnically inclusive government in Kabul.

Tangible aid has been slower to materialize. Although Tajikistan initially pledged to harbor as many as 100,000 refugees, it has not followed through on this commitment and has turned back *asylum* seekers who managed to cross the border. The State Committee for National Security claims that around 600 people *attempt* the crossing each day, but it is unknown how many are allowed to stay in the country as the government appears reluctant to accommodate large numbers.

On the other hand, Tajikistan has recently taken the intiative in facilitating the transfer of food and humanitarian supplies to Afghanistan. On November 28, 2021, Tajikistan opened a humanitarian corridor for the *United Nations World Food Program* (WFP) to deliver desperately needed supplies to Afghanistan before snow closes roads for the winter. The WFP plans to deliver 2,500 metric tons of wheat flour to the region of Badakhshan, which shares a long border with Tajikistan. Regular flights now connect Dushanbe with Kabul and other locations in Afghanistan, and are available to the entire humanitarian community and supported by the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS).

Regional Security

Tajikistan is a rising influence in regional organizations where, alongside powerful influences like China and Russia, it promotes problematic counterterrorism and counterextremism strategies that target peaceful religious practice and depict religious freedom and security as mutually exclusive. Rahmon's repressive policies against religiously-affiliated political opposition groups have also increased his prestige among neighboring states with a similar tendency to conflate counterterrorism and authoritarian overreach. At the third *summit* of Central Asian leaders in early August, as Afghanistan was falling to the Taliban, Rahmon was *awarded* the "Honorable Decoration of Heads of State of Central Asia" for "outstanding services" in the "consolidation of peace and security in the region," among other achievements.

Rahmon at Summit of Central Asian leaders. Source: Embassy of Tajikistan in Germany website – https://mfa.tj/en/berlin/view/8375/meeting-with-the-prosecutor-general-of-germany

On September 17, 2021, Tajikistan hosted the annual *meeting* of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was largely devoted to developments in Afghanistan and welcoming the Islamic Republic of Iran as the bloc's newest member. Relations between Tajikistan and Iran have warmed in recent years, with the latter's ascension to the SCO signaling an increase in regional connectivity. On October 27, 2021, the *foreign ministers* of both countries met in Tehran and discussed the expansion of political, economic, and cultural ties, as well as the need to cooperate on counterterrorism and counterextremism efforts.

Founded on June 15, 2001, and long dominated by Russia and China, the SCO has sought to address and successfully promoted vague and expansive definitions of "extremism" and "terrorism," which alongside "separatism" represent what China refers to as the "*three evils.*"

For China, these "three evils" are illustrated by *Uyghur* Muslims in the western province of Xinjiang, where the government has imprisoned up to two million citizens in reeducation camps in a brutal campaign the United States designated as *genocide*. China uses "counterterrorism" as an "effective way to … *expand its influence* in Central Asia" and operates a *"secret" base* in Tajikistan near the Wakhan corridor, believed to target Uyghurs traveling between China and Afghanistan. On October 27, 2021, Tajikistan offered to transfer full control of the base to China, and approved the construction of a *new Chinese base* in the mountainous Gorno-Badakhshan region.

Tajikistan also received an increase in military aid from Russia, which operates its biggest foreign *base* within the country and has vowed to reinforce it with 30 tanks by the end of the year. On October 23, 2021, the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) held a massive drill in Tajikistan along the Afghan border, adding to a series of Russian-Tajik military exercises over the summer.

The Taliban, despite its conciliatory rhetoric towards neighboring countries, has placed *militants* from Tajikistan in charge of the northern border since capturing the region in July. On September 22, pro-Taliban media in Afghanistan reported that a *new branch* of the Lashkar-e Mansouri Martyrdom Battalion was also founded in the northern province of Badakhshan.

In October, the Taliban *reinforced* these militants, including members of the Tajik Islamist faction Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), with American hardware that included combat gear and armored vehicles. JA was founded with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the Rahmon regime, and Russian media has recently published unconfirmed reports that its leader, known as Mahdi Arsalan, has expressed his willingness to *invade* Tajikistan.

Persecuting the Peaceful Practice of Religion

The threat of Islamist violence emanating from Afghanistan amplifies the need for Tajik authorities to cultivate a judicious policy towards Islam and, indeed, all religions. A heavy-handed approach from the government can cause otherwise peaceful believers to see the state as an enemy of religion, leading to a rise in extremist sympathies.

USCIRF has previously *reported* on Tajikistan's *counterproductive* approach to counterterrorism. On February 12, 2021, Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison. Despite being widely acknowledged as a "moderate preacher" who was not even critical of the regime, he was not officially appointed by the state, and observers view his case as a warning to other *independent clerics*, most of whom are now reportedly afraid to speak publicly.

Even an official position granted by the government is no guarantee of immunity. On March 5, 2021, Mahmadsodyk Sayidov, the state-appointed *imam* of a mosque in Khulob, was arrested immediately after refusing to preach the official sermon provided by the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA). On June 4, Sayidov was sentenced to five years in prison for allegedly participating in an "extremist" organization.

Meanwhile, Tajikistan's relentless persecution of IRPT members and their *families* continues unabated. On September 5, 2021, Russian authorities arrested Barakatullo Ghoziev at Tajikistan's request to repatriate him to the country to face up to 25 years in prison for "high treason and inciting religious hatred." Barakatullo is the son of late cleric and IRPT member Eshoni Ghozi, who was killed by Islamic State supporters during a *prison riot* in 2019. His other two sons were both given lengthy sentences in 2019 and 2020 in a familiar pattern.

Muslims are not the only believers persecuted by the state. Shamil Khakimov, a 70-year-old Jehovah's Witness, remains in prison for "extremism" despite his *seriously declining health*. Khakimov has high blood pressure and was still recovering from major surgery at the time of his arrest on February 26, 2019. The leg that was operated on was covered with open sores and worsening. In addition, Khakimov is under severe emotional distress due to the death of his son in September. His son was the only visitor allowed to see him besides his lawyer, but Khakimov was not permitted to attend the funeral, in further violation of the *UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*.

Conclusion

Tajikistan is in a perilous position. The regime of Emomali Rahmon may realize short-term gains in domestic and regional popularity as it stands firm against the Taliban. Unless the government implements its stated commitment to align its policies on religious freedom with international standards, it will continue to feed the process of domestic radicalization and fuel long-term grievances.

By further aligning its counterextremism strategy with those of China, Russia, and Iran, Tajikistan is relying on authoritarian tactics that will inevitably require more repressive methods to maintain the status quo over time. If this is the model for Tajikistan, the long-term prospects for religious freedom and human rights in the region are bleak. The United States must ensure that its security assistance to Tajikistan incentivizes a different path, as recommended in USCIRF's 2021 *Annual Report*.

UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Professional Staff

Danielle Ashbahian
Supervisory Public Affairs Officer

Keely Bakken
Senior Policy Analyst

Dwight Bashir
Director of Outreach and Policy

Susan Bishai
Policy Analyst

Elizabeth K. Cassidy
Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Policy Analyst

Patrick Greenwalt
Policy Analyst

Gabrielle Hasenstab
Communications Specialist

Roy Haskins
Director of Finance and Operations

Thomas Kraemer
Director of Human Resources

Kirsten Lavery
Supervisory Policy Analyst

John Lechner
Policy Analyst

Niala Mohammad
Senior Policy Analyst

Jason Morton
Senior Policy Analyst

Mohyeldin Omer
Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre
Victims List and Outreach Specialist

Jamie Staley
Supervisory Policy Advisor

Zack Udin
Researcher

Nina Ullom
Congressional Relations and Outreach Specialist

Madeline Vellturo
Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

www.USCIRF.gov
@USCIRF
Media@USCIRF.gov

732 N. Capitol Street, NW, Suite #A714
Washington, DC 20401
202-523-3240