

TAJIKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, the Tajikistani government's record on religious freedom remained bleak. State repression of the country's Muslim majority gained momentum amidst government fears about threats emanating from neighboring Afghanistan, especially after the Taliban's August takeover. In Tajikistan, alleged extremism and terrorism are punishable without requiring acts that involve violence or incitement of imminent violence. Charges are often arbitrarily issued against religious individuals and their trials lack due process and procedural safeguards. During 2021, the government conducted several mass arrests and imprisoned individuals for alleged involvement in illegal Muslim groups.

Muslim women reported an intensification of the government's [anti-hijab campaign](#), with frequent checkpoints at hospitals, schools, and public facilities in the capital denying entrance to covered women. Male police publicly harassed women in hijabs and in some cases detained them. Bearded young men continue to report [being denied passports](#) unless they shave, although there is no legal requirement for them to do so. In October, the lower house of Parliament introduced legislation increasing the punishment for "underground" [religious education](#), including over the internet. In 2016, Tajikistan banned private religious education and children are only allowed religious instruction by their parents at home. Since 2011, minors are barred from all public religious activity except funerals and receive only limited instruction in the history of religion at public schools. The new legislation introduces higher fines for illegal instruction and now includes the possibility of prison sentences of up to three years. The state claims there have been at least 1,833 incidents of illegal

religious instruction since 2019, involving 43 imams, 983 unofficial clerics, and 32 teachers.

In 2021, the government continued its sweeping campaign against Muslim clerics, leaders, and intellectuals. On February 12, Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison. Despite being widely acknowledged as not critical of the regime, the state targeted him for preaching without an official appointment and his case has become a warning to other [independent clerics](#), many of whom are reportedly afraid to speak publicly. Official appointment is also no guarantee of immunity. On March 5, Mahmadsodyk Sayidov, the state-appointed [imam](#) of a mosque in Kulob, 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. Tajikistan regularly uses extradition treaties to target political dissidents and religious non-conformists abroad. On September 5, 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." Ghoziev is the son of late cleric and Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) member Eshoni Ghozi, who was supposedly killed by Islamic State supporters during a [prison riot](#) in 2019. Shamil Khakimov, a 70-year-old Jehovah's Witness, remains in prison in Tajikistan for "extremism" despite his [seriously declining health](#) and in September was forbidden from attending the funeral of his son in violation of the United Nations (UN) [Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Tajikistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Condition U.S. security assistance to the Tajikistani government on 1) reform of the 2009 religion law and the improvement of conditions for freedom of religion or belief, and 2) mandated religious freedom training for Tajikistani officials, including education about the benefits of religious freedom for countering and preventing violent extremism;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Tajikistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Press the Tajikistani government at the highest levels to identify and immediately release individuals imprisoned in Tajikistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations; account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; and allow international observers to monitor conditions in Tajikistani prisons.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Tajikistan in 2021](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Tajikistan's Inhumane Treatment of Religious Prisoner Indicative of Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions](#)
- **Podcast:** [Religious Freedom and Taliban Fears in Tajikistan](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Shamil Khakimov](#)

Background

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and ruled since 1992 by President Emomali Rahmon, who has concentrated power in his family's hands. The government faces financial catastrophe in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. In 2021, the situation was further complicated by numerous crises, including a [border conflict](#) with neighboring Kyrgyzstan, [violent protests](#) in the ethnic Pamiri city of Khorog, and the Taliban takeover of neighboring Afghanistan. The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim—around 86 percent—while Shi'a Muslims, mostly ethnic Pamiris located in the mountainous east, account for roughly four percent. The remaining 10 percent includes Russian Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.

Tajikistan's legal environment for freedom of religion or belief sharply declined after the adoption of several highly restrictive laws in 2009. The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions 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 in the appointment of imams and the content of sermons; required official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign coreligionists; and imposed state controls on the content, publication, and import of religious materials. In 2011 and 2012, administrative and penal code amendments set new penalties, including large fines and prison terms, for religion-related charges such as organizing or participating in "unapproved" religious meetings. A 2011 law on parental responsibility banned minors from any organized religious activity except funerals. Since 2014, the state has paid imams' salaries and required them to wear state-issued religious garments, and the content of sermons is commonly dictated by the government.

Mass Arrests of Muslims

Similar to its activities in 2020, the government continued to conduct mass arrests and detentions for alleged religious extremism in 2021. On April 9, 117 individuals received prison sentences between five and 23 years for supposed involvement in the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). Defendants came from all over the country and included prominent Muslim leaders, scholars, and local politicians. In June, a closed trial began against 18 men accused of [Salafism](#), an ill-defined but illegal category in Tajikistan, frequently applied to Muslims who do not practice in the state-approved fashion. Defendants claim they confessed to the charges under torture, which is endemic in Tajikistan, particularly in prisons. Religious prisoners are singled out for particularly harsh treatment by both authorities and fellow prisoners.

UN Human Rights Review

During Tajikistan's [Universal Periodic Review](#) in November, the UN Human Rights Council noted Tajikistan's misuse of vague and broad legislation concerning terrorism and extremism to limit peaceful religious practice, target political dissidence, and facilitate authoritarian overreach. The Council noted that Tajikistan routinely applies

unfounded extremism charges to journalists, human rights activists, political opposition, and religious minorities or non-conformists. A planned trip by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, was canceled after the Tajikistani government failed to extend a promised official invitation.

Repression of the IRPT

In 2021, Tajikistan continued its relentless campaign against the IRPT, a moderate Islamic party that constituted the only real political opposition in the country prior to the state banning it in 2015 on [unsubstantiated charges of terrorism](#). State persecution of the IRPT is motivated by fear of political opposition, but justifications are framed in terms of combating religious extremism and terrorism. On June 1, a former IRPT member was sentenced to five years in prison for membership in a banned [extremist](#) organization, despite having cut ties with the party in 2015. In September, the imprisoned 70-year-old spokesman for the IRPT, Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda, was [attacked](#) in the prison hospital while recovering from heart surgery. Violent attacks against IRPT members are common in prison and numerous prominent members have been murdered while serving out their sentences. In November, the wife of an imprisoned IRPT leader was inexplicably denied her bi-annual visitation and suspects that her husband is recovering from [torture](#).

Key U.S. Policy

In 2021, the United States and Tajikistan [marked 30 years](#) of "productive and friendly relations" on the anniversary of the U.S. government's recognition of an independent Tajikistan in 1991. Since that time, the U.S. government has provided \$1.8 billion in assistance to promote economic development, education, and health, as well as regional security, including \$330 million in security sector assistance to help combat terrorism and narco-trafficking. Over the next two years, the U.S. government has pledged an additional \$60 million in [security sector assistance](#). Since 2020, the United States has provided Tajikistan with 2.5 million doses of [COVID-19](#) vaccines, and more than \$12 million in equipment and technical support to combat the pandemic.

On December 6, Peter Riley was [sworn in](#) as the first director of the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) new mission in Tajikistan. USAID [initiatives](#) in Tajikistan work to foster food security, support civil society and nongovernmental organizations, improve education quality and access, combat human trafficking, and help reintegrate migrant workers into their home communities. [In July](#), Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Tajikistan Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin in Washington, D.C. reaffirming the strength and importance of the U.S.-Tajikistan bilateral relationship and expressing appreciation for continued leadership on regional security issues.

On November 15, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA, although it has also maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the important national interest of the United States." It has designated Tajikistan as a CPC each year since 2016.