

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan remained extremely poor. Throughout the year, the government enforced draconian laws and tightened its already repressive Soviet-era control over the religious practices of all groups. In particular, authorities targeted Ismaili Shi’a Muslims and others who deviated from the state’s preferred interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam through harassment, detainment, prison sentences, and transnational repression.

The government enforced the law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (religion law), which limits religious education, restricts the import and distribution of religious materials, maintains discriminatory requirements for registering mosques and appointing Muslim clergy, and prohibits unregistered religious activity. For example, in February, Sughd region officials raided a Protestant church that met for worship without state authorization. The state-backed Islamic Council of Ulema, which governs the practice of Hanafi Sunni Islam, prohibited women from attending mosques. Additionally, the law On Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children prohibited children from participating in the activities of religious associations. In June, President Emomali Rahmon approved amendments to the law On the Regulation of Traditions and Ceremonies (traditions law) to ban children from participating in the Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha custom of collecting sweets and small gifts from neighbors. The same amendments also forbade the sale, import, promotion, and wearing of clothes that are “foreign to national culture.” The law already included restrictions on circumcisions, baby naming rituals, weddings, religious pilgrimage ceremonies, and funerals.

The government continued to limit the once active civil society in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), restricting the flow of information about religious freedom and other human rights conditions for the Ismaili Shi’a Muslim minority living there. For example, authorities harassed and leveled criminal charges against the relatives of exiled human rights activists who report on religious freedom, including violations targeting Ismailis and other persecuted groups. Outside of the GBAO, Amnesty International found that authorities meddled in the selection of individuals to fill key positions within the leadership of the Dushanbe Ismaili Center, a community and religious space, and the Ismaili National Council, which governs the activities of Ismaili Shi’a Muslims in Tajikistan. Moreover, while surveilling Ismaili religious meetings, State Committee on National Security (SCNS) officials reportedly did not respect religious and cultural norms, such as removing shoes while in prayer halls.

In April, during Ramadan, authorities in Sughd region arrested [Ikhtiyorhoja Kamolov](#)—an imam at Khoja Muhammad Balodurkun Mosque in Rumon village—on “extremism” charges, accusing him of spreading the banned religious ideology Salafism and allowing minors to attend mosque. Authorities also arrested [Bakhtiyor Akbarov](#), another religious leader, and [Mirzoburhan Salmanzoda](#), a congregant, charging all three men with “extremism.” Akbarov and Salmanzoda remained in police custody without trial as of August, although Kamolov’s status was unclear.

Tajik authorities, including President Rahmon, discouraged citizens from going on the Hajj pilgrimage and called on them to spend money on public works projects instead. Furthermore, authorities required Hajj applicants to pay fees through a bank run by Rahmon’s close relatives.

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);
- Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
- Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international freedom of religion or belief standards by the Tajik and other regional governments;
- Impose targeted sanctions on SCNS officials and others 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
- Condition military-to-military engagement with Tajikistan based on government reforms to Tajikistan’s religion law and related legislation.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Tajikistan’s religious freedom conditions by conducting relevant hearings

and delegation visits, including through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission; and

- Reintroduce and pass a revised version of the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention (TRAP) Act, including robust reporting requirements for the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Justice, to counter Tajikistan’s abuse of International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) Red Notices targeting individuals abroad for their religion, belief, or peaceful, religiously informed political activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Calls on the U.S. Government to Impose Consequences on Tajikistan Due to Increasing Repression](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Around 90 percent of Tajikistan's population is Muslim, with the majority adhering to Hanafi Sunni Islam. Around four percent are ethnic Pamiris, who adhere to Ismaili Shi'a Islam and reside in the GBAO. The remainder of the population includes members of Christian denominations, such as Russian Orthodox, Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.

Traditions Law Amendments

In March, President Rahmon gave a speech on Tajik national and religious values and the risk of religious extremism and terrorism in the country. During his speech, Rahmon warned about the danger of the "Salafi movement" and those who wear "alien" clothes, such as hijabs, connecting both to activities defined as "extremist" under Tajik law. In June, Rahmon [approved](#) amendments to the traditions law to prohibit the "import, sale, promotion and wearing of clothes alien to national culture," which authorities interpreted as including all religious head coverings besides headscarves tied behind the neck in what they deem the "Tajik" way.

Following Rahmon's speech but prior to the official passage of the amendments, state authorities engaged in informational campaigns and made arrests across the country. For example, the Committee for Work with Women and Family took to the streets to educate women about "national" dress and "extremism" prevention. In May, authorities denied women wearing their head coverings in a non-"Tajik" style entry into a local hospital and threatened them with fines. Officials in Sino district, Dushanbe, arrested men with beards and women wearing their headscarves the "foreign" way, interrogating, fingerprinting, and photographing them. In another instance in Dushanbe, officials detained a group of men with beards, coercing them to shave and to pay for the shaving tools they were forced to use. The amendments also impacted businesses that sell religious clothing, as law enforcement regularly monitored shops to ensure they do not continue to offer such merchandise.

In July, the state-backed Islamic Council of Ulema, which often bolsters state policies that limit religious freedom, supported the amendments by issuing a fatwa against tight, transparent, and black garments—the latter of which are often locally invoked as a euphemism for "Islamic extremist" clothing.

State Enforcement of Anti-Extremism Policies Impacting Religious Freedom

The Tajik government continues to level "extremism" accusations against individuals for their peaceful religious activities, particularly those adhering, or suspected of adhering, to banned but peaceful religious groups and ideologies. The government also targeted religiously based political parties it considered "extremist." According

to contacts, the government also engages in transnational repression, abusing INTERPOL by submitting fraudulent requests for arrests of its citizens on alleged "extremism" charges. In March, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders Mary Lawlor reported that nongovernmental organizations in Tajikistan generally refrained from working on sensitive issues such as religious freedom, fearing it could lead to criminal charges related to "terrorism and extremism." For the first time, following a 2021 closed court decision, Tajikistan's Supreme Court in 2024 included Jehovah's Witnesses on its public list of banned "extremist" organizations.

In October, President Rahmon announced that the Ministry of Internal Affairs arrested over 5,000 "illiterate mullahs" and 1,500 other individuals for practicing "superstition," "sorcery," and "fortune-telling." Rahmon argued that such practices, despite their popularity in Tajikistan, contributed to the spread of "extremism and terrorism." Earlier in the year, Rahmon also said that the "Prophet of Islam" forbade Muslims from going to fortunetellers and sorcerers. The government amended the criminal code in June to punish sorcerers and fortune tellers with penalties of up to two years' imprisonment or a fine of up to 144,000 somonis (\$13,350).

In June, the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) published recommendations to prevent "extremism and terrorism" among youth, including specific guidance on how to identify "extremists." The recommendations called attention to where individuals get their religious information, how they dress—including the color and shape of their clothing and beard length—and how they act upon their beliefs, such as through adherence to religious food laws and prayer habits. Earlier in the year, the SCRA published guidance for Sunni Muslims on how to pray, including on prayer volume and hand placement.

Key U.S. Policy

In March, soldiers from the Virginia National Guard [conducted](#) an infantry tactics exchange with Tajik soldiers in Dushanbe as part of the U.S. Department of Defense National Guard Bureau State Partnership Program. In September, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Tajikistan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhanced regional security, and human rights, with an emphasis on disability rights. Neither religious freedom nor related human rights appear to have represented significant points of discussion during that meeting. In October, then U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Asia Anjali Kaur [traveled](#) to Tajikistan to visit project sites and discuss USAID support for local businesses and rural communities.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.