



TAJIKISTAN

Key Findings

The government of Tajikistan suppresses and punishes all religious activity independent of state control, particularly the activities of Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Numerous laws that severely restrict religious freedom have been implemented in the country since 2009. The government also imprisons individuals on unproven criminal allegations linked to Islamic religious activity and affiliation. Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned since 2007. Based on these concerns, as it has since 2012, USCIRF again recommends in 2015 that the U.S. government designate Tajikistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Previously Tajikistan was on USCIRF's Tier 2 (formerly Watch List) since 2009.

Background

Tajikistan is an isolated and impoverished country that experienced a five-year civil war in the 1990s, which resulted in as many as 100,000 deaths; the official post-war amnesty included many Tajik officials responsible for torture. The government is weak and highly corrupt, and the country's economy leads the world in its dependence on remittances from migrant workers, mostly in Russia. After the Russian economy's

More than 90 percent of Tajikistan's estimated total population of 7.9 million is Muslim, most of whom belong to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam; about four percent are Ismaili Shia. Most of the 150,000 Christians are Russian Orthodox, but there are also Baptists, Roman Catholics, Adventists, Lutherans, and Korean Protestants plus small numbers of Baha'is, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, and fewer than 300 Jews. The legal environment in Tajikistan for religious freedom has deteriorated significantly since 2009, when a series of highly restrictive laws were passed and implemented. The 2009 religion law establishes onerous registration requirements for religious groups; criminalizes unregistered religious activity and private religious education and proselytism; sets strict limits on the number and size of mosques; allows state interference with the appointment of imams; requires official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign co-religionists; imposes state controls on the content, publication and import of religious materials; and restricts Muslim prayer to mosques, cemeteries, homes, and shrines.

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

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downturn, many Tajik migrant workers returned home in 2014, giving rise to new social tensions. Tajikistan has good relations with Iran, its second-largest trading partner; these two countries also share common language and heritage.

meetings. Alleged organizers of a "religious extremist study group" face eight to 12-year prison terms. In addition, a 2011 law on parental responsibility banned minors from any organized religious activity except funerals. The State Department highlighted in its most recent International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report

that “Tajikistan is the only country in the world in which the law prohibits persons under the age of 18 from participating in public religious activities.”

Tajikistan’s extremism law punishes extremist, terrorist, or revolutionary activities without requiring acts that involve violence or incitement to imminent violence. Trials under these charges lack due process and procedural safeguards. The Tajik government uses concerns over Islamist extremism to justify actions against individuals taking part in certain religious activities. According to public opinion polls conducted by the Tajik NGO Sharq Analytical Center, most Tajiks view poverty, not extremism, as the country’s main problem. Little data on official bans of groups deemed extremist is public, but *Tabligh Jamaat* is prohibited.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2014–2015

Restrictions on Muslims

Tajik officials monitor mosques and their attendees for views they deem extremist or statements critical of the government; 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 sermons. The law prohibits the wearing of headscarves in educational institutions, and bans teachers younger

Rahmon also instructed the Council of Ulema to adopt a standard uniform for imams. The Sharq Analytical Center, reports that these policies have led to a sharp division between official and unofficial Muslim clergy, giving rise to popular mistrust of Muslim institutions.

Trials and Imprisonment of Muslims

During 2014, Tajik law enforcement officials continued to arrest and prosecute dozens of individuals for alleged links to banned Islamic groups or international terrorist networks. Due to Tajikistan’s flawed judicial system, it is almost impossible to ascertain the accuracy of such charges. For example, in December 2014 Tajikistan’s prosecutors said that nearly 50 young men from banned Islamist groups were arrested in the Sogd region for allegedly preparing to join jihadists in Syria. In February 2015, Tajikistan’s Interior Minister claimed that 200 Tajik labor migrants in Russia had joined militants in Syria, RFE/RL reported, but others could not confirm that figure.

The Chairman of Tajikistan’s Council of Ulema expressed concern in April 2014 over the increasing number of Tajik officials who reportedly have become adherents of Salafi or Shi’a Islam. The Sharq Analytical Center reports that Salafism is increasing in popularity among the Tajik political elite. A Tajik policeman, Captain Sharif Mirov was arrested in May 2014 for

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than 50 from wearing beards in public buildings. In 2014, the semi-official Council of Ulema announced it would start to allow women to attend mosques and would encourage female students at religious schools to become *imam-hatibs*, to work with female worshippers at mosques with women-only sections.

In 2014, the Ministry of Finance and the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) began paying the salaries of the imams of cathedral mosques. According to the Forum 18 News Service, these are the only mosques where the state allows sermons, which are prepared in advance by the Council of Ulema. President Emomali

allegedly inciting religious hatred by propagating Salafi Islam, reportedly the first such arrest in the country. The Deputy Head of the SCRA has called Salafis extremist because they pray differently and are argumentative about Islamic beliefs. In December 2014, the Tajik Supreme Court ruled that the Salafi Muslim movement is “extremist,” and ordered Web sites blocked in the country, according to the independent Asia-Plus News Agency. Salafi Muslims now risk prosecution under three Criminal Code articles relating to extremism, which carry penalties between five and 12 years in jail, Forum 18 reported.

Tajikistan has the only legal Islamist political party in the former Soviet Union, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), which was given such status as part of the country's post-civil war peace settlement. Government repression of Islamic practice is often intertwined with official efforts to suppress the IRP. In January 2014, Umedjon Tojiev, 34, an IRP member from the northern city of Isfara, died in a prison hospital under highly suspicious circumstances; he was arrested in October 2013 on charges of extremism.

Center, Central Asia's first Ismaili center, opened in Dushanbe in 2009, and Tajikistan announced that one of the world's largest mosques, funded by Qatar, will open in Dushanbe in 2017.

Restrictions on Religious Minorities

Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in 2007 for allegedly causing "discontent" and for conscientious objection to military service. Jehovah's Witnesses still face official harassment. Small Protestant and other groups cannot

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After the reporting period, the IRP suffered a major election defeat, garnering only 1.5 percent in Tajikistan's March 1, 2015 vote, leaving it without any seats in parliament for the first time in 15 years. Five days after these much-criticized elections, a Tajik opposition leader, Umarali Kuvatov, was killed in Istanbul. The IRP and various Tajik human rights groups have reported on the torture of detainees and prisoners.

A leading Tajik human rights lawyer, Shukhrat Kudratov, was sentenced in January 2015, to nine years in prison on false charges of fraud and bribery, according to Human Rights Watch. He is known for taking on politically sensitive cases, including victims of police torture and those accused of "religious extremism;" he also works with the independent Asia-Plus News Agency.

Restrictions on Houses of Worship

Tajik law sets strict limits on the numbers of mosques permitted, and since 2008 the government has closed hundreds of unregistered mosques and prayer rooms and demolished three unregistered mosques in Dushanbe. The nation's only synagogue, located in Dushanbe, was bulldozed in 2008, although the Jewish community later was given a building by President Rakhmon's brother-in-law, one of Tajikistan's richest bankers, which it uses for worship but does not own. In July 2013, the SCRA fired the Chief Imam in Vossei of the Khatlon Region, Ubaydullo Khasanov, after he asked President Rakhmon for land to build a new mosque. In contrast, the Aga Khan Cultural

obtain legal status under onerous registration requirements. In June 2013, according to the State Department, authorities brought a second administrative case against the pastor of Grace Church in Khujand for an "illegal" chapel, "religious propaganda," and unregistered Bible studies. In another case, Forum 18 reported that in June 2014 an unnamed church was warned to stop allowing children to take part in worship meetings or face a three-month suspension of church activity.

Restrictions on Religious Literature

The government must approve the production, importation, export, sale, and distribution of religious materials by registered religious groups, which is in effect a ban on religious materials by unregistered religious groups. The Ministry of Culture has confiscated religious texts it deems inappropriate, including from Jehovah's Witnesses.

Restrictions on Religious Education

A state license is required for religious instruction, and both parents must give written permission for children to receive instruction. Only central mosques are allowed to set up educational groups. As of 2013, the activities of seven of the country's eight madrassas were suspended, according to the State Department. Tajik authorities now allow only one madrassa to operate, in Tursonzade, near Dushanbe. In December 2014, police in Vahdat near Dushanbe, arrested Komiljon Akhrorov

and Sayidmumin Rashidov for teaching school-aged children at home about the Qur'an and Islam. In January 2015, the SCRA issued written warnings to various Protestant churches, threatening punishment unless they stopped allowing children to worship, according to Forum 18.

Civil Society and Religious Issues

Tajik civil society is subject to official pressure, and Tajik non-governmental organizations have expressed fear of reporting on religious freedom due to perceived dangers of involvement in that issue. In June 2014, Alexander Sodiqov, a Tajik citizen and University of Toronto graduate student who has written blogs that criticized Tajikistan's restrictive policies on religion, was arrested on charges of espionage while conducting foreign-funded research in the Ismaili-majority Gorno-Badakshan region near Afghanistan. After an international outcry, Sodiqov was allowed to leave Tajikistan in September 2014, but the espionage charges were not dropped.

U.S. Policy

Tajikistan is strategically important for the United States, partly because ethnic Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, the country's southern neighbor. Since 2010, the United States has expanded its cooperation with Central Asian states, including Tajikistan, to allow it to ship cargo overland via the Northern Distribution Network, which will be needed as U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan withdraw. In addition, Tajikistan has given U.S. Special Operations Forces permission to enter the country on a case-by-case basis during counter-terrorism operations. In 2014, the Tajik government expressed interest in an offer from the U.S. Defense Department of excess U.S. military equipment, for which Tajikistan would only pay transport costs.

Since 2010, the United States and Tajikistan have discussed bilateral policy and assistance issues through an Annual Bilateral Consultation (ABC). The State Department's stated priorities in Tajikistan include increasing respect for the rights of Tajikistan's citizens and strengthening sovereignty and stability. Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal led the U.S. delegation to the third ABC session, held in Tajikistan in June 2014. However, the

ABC was reduced from two days to one, decreasing the time to discuss relevant issues. The State Department again visited Tajikistan in December 2014 and raised religious freedom concerns with Tajikistan's government and met with civil society representatives; higher-level religious freedom discussions occurred in February 2015. The State Department's annual IRF Reports have documented worsened religious freedom in Tajikistan. The U.S. assistance program in Tajikistan promotes improved legislation relating to civil society, the media, and speech; legal assistance to non-governmental organizations; and stronger non-state electronic media outlets.

Recommendations

In addition to recommending that the U.S. government designate Tajikistan as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Press the Tajik government 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 those commitments;
- Work with the international community, particularly during events on countering terrorism sponsored by the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to ensure there is private and public criticism of Tajikistan's repressive approach to regulating religion and countering extremism, including its risk of radicalizing the country's population;
- Urge the Tajik government to agree to visits by UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Independence of the Judiciary, and Torture, set specific visit dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for such a visit;
- Maintain two days of the ABC dialogues to allow a full discussion of all relevant issues, particularly human rights and religious freedom;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy continues to monitor the trials of individuals charged on account of their religious affiliation, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists, and presses

the Tajik government to ensure that every prisoner has greater access to his or her family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and a lawyer;

- 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 the government establishing and implementing a timetable of specific steps to reform the religion law and improve conditions of freedom of religion or belief; and
- Use funding allocated to the State Department under the Title VIII Program (established in the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983) for research, including on human rights and religious freedom in former Soviet states, and language training.