

# TAJIKISTAN

## USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, the Tajikistani government's already dismal record on religious freedom deteriorated. The regime of President Emomali Rahmon maintained its repressive policies, suppressing displays of public religiosity by individuals of all faiths and persecuting minority communities—especially actual and alleged Salafists, a term that is broadly applied. Authorities pursued a crackdown on various attributes of faith, including restrictions on wedding and funerary banquets, and pursued extralegal bans on beards and hijabs. Under the guise of a struggle against religious extremism, the government continued to torment former members of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), sentencing rank-and-file former party members to extensive jail time and [extraditing](#) former party elites from abroad. Tajikistani authorities harassed family members of imprisoned IRPT members for speaking at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw in September, earning Tajikistan a [rebuke](#) from the U.S. delegation in its closing remarks.

On July 29, 2019, President Rahmon signed an order prohibiting the import and sale of clothing representing a “foreign national culture.” The ban is widely perceived as a further assault on female Islamic dress. Women are already forbidden from wearing hijabs in numerous public places, including hospitals and schools. Locals [report](#) that officials stop women in hijabs, record their personal information, and force them to wear their headscarves in the “Tajik

fashion” (shortened and pulled back to reveal hair). In December, Nilufar Rajabova [reported](#) that she had been detained with more than 20 other women by the police in Dushanbe, who told them to go back to Iran or Afghanistan if they wanted to wear the hijab. Rajabova was eventually fined for “hooliganism.”

Many religious minorities hide their affiliations for fear of government scrutiny and social backlash, and expressed concern over government [plans](#) to document individual religious affiliation in the upcoming census. As reported in the Russian-language press, one Member of Parliament [explained](#) that the government already believes that around 90 percent of the population is Muslim, so the goal of the census is to get an accurate breakdown of the remaining 10 percent. The Jehovah's Witness community has been deemed illegal since 2007, and on September 10, 2019, Shamil Hakimov was [sentenced](#) to seven and a half years in prison—followed by three years prohibition from working in a religious organization—for sharing his beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness. In early 2019, government officials burned 5,000 Baptist calendars that had been seized at Dushanbe International Airport after being [deemed](#) “propaganda of an alien religion.” Social tolerance for religious minority communities continued to decline. Members of less traditional faiths in Tajikistan, like [Seventh-Day Adventists](#) and [Presbyterians](#), as well members of communities with ancient ties to the region, like [Zoroastrians](#) and [Shi'a Muslims](#), all report a rise in pressure and hostility from family and community.

### 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. assistance to the Tajikistani government, with the exception of aid to improve humanitarian conditions or advance human rights, on the reform of the 2009 religion law and the improvement of conditions for freedom of religion or belief;
- 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 and investigate the recent prison riots.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** OSCE HDIM in Warsaw in September 2019
- **Briefing:** [Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: New Policy Guidance from the OSCE](#)
- **Legislation Factsheet:** [Anti-Extremism Laws](#)

## Background

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and has been ruled since 1992 by President Rahmon, who has concentrated power in the hands of his family. Tajikistan experienced a five-year civil war (1992–1997) following his ascension to power, resulting in more than 100,000 deaths; the post-war amnesty included many Tajikistani officials responsible for torture. The government is weak and highly corrupt, and 40 percent of the country's gross domestic product is from labor remittances, mostly from Russia. The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim—around 86 percent Sunni—while Shi'a Muslims, mostly located in the mountainous east, comprise roughly 4 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. In particular, 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 with 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. Small Protestant and other groups cannot obtain legal status under these burdensome registration requirements. 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.

Tajikistan's anti-extremism law fails to define extremism clearly and often leads to arbitrary detention. Extremist, terrorist, or revolutionary activities are punishable without requiring acts that involve violence or incitement of imminent violence, while trials under these charges lack due process and procedural safeguards. The Tajikistani government continued to use concerns over Islamist extremism to justify actions against participants in certain religious or political activities. Although the existence of the IRPT—the former Soviet Union's only legal Islamic political party—was a condition of the post-civil war peace treaty, the Tajikistani government banned the IRPT as an extremist group in September 2015. The government's suppression of the IRPT is intertwined with its broader repression of Muslim religious practices; the group had called for respecting Tajikistan's secular constitution as well as its international religious freedom commitments, and it opposed restrictions on beards, headscarves, religious education, and children attending mosques. "Salafism" has been banned as extremist since 2009; as a result, the mere performance of Muslim rituals in ways the government deems "foreign" or inconsistent with the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam is tantamount to criminal activity.

## Prisoners

An unknown number of individuals are imprisoned under dubious charges of religious extremism and terrorism, and there are worrying

signs that the country's prison system is straining to accommodate them. On May 20, 2019, a massive [prison riot in Vakhdat](#) resulted in the deaths of at least 29 prisoners, including several senior members of the IRPT. This was the second prison riot in six months, and in both instances the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility. Observers fear that Tajikistan's overburdened prison system is becoming fertile ground for ISIS recruiters. Torture and corruption are commonplace, with bribery alleged as a common means for escaping harsh treatment. The International Committee for the Red Cross has been denied access to Tajikistani prisons since 2004. On October 25, 2019, Tajikistani officials approved an [amnesty legislation](#) that would release around 20,000 people to mark the 25th anniversary of the country's constitution; that figure exceeded some estimates placing the entire prison population at around 10,000 inmates.

## Government Control of Islam

Despite constitutional guarantees of separation between religion and state, the government maintained strict control over both the Muslim clergy and Islamic practice. Imams are often salaried by the government and act as agents of the state. Clergy are required to visit important historical sites and state museums, and they can be fired for insufficient knowledge of national culture and official symbolism. In September 2019, imams in the district of Mastchoh were reportedly using money raised through offerings and payments for clerical services to fund the construction of a local branch of the president's political party.

In 2019, the building that once housed the only madrasa in the region of Khovalinsk was [turned into a music school](#). Most madrassas were closed after passage of the 2009 religion law. Students can only receive a Muslim education at the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan and the government does not appoint or recognize any imams who were educated abroad. Children brought back to Tajikistan from foreign madrassas are forced to stay for an indefinite period in special boarding schools for "readjustment," and parents [report](#) not even being allowed to bring their children home on weekends.

## Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Tajikistan has emphasized the importance of security and regional connectivity. Securing Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan and reducing the flow of narcotics and illicit goods that finance terrorist groups in that country remains a priority. On January 6–7, 2020, just after the reporting period, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Alice G. Wells visited Tajikistan and [announced](#) that the United States was "deepening our security cooperation in the areas of border security, counterterrorism, law enforcement, and joint military exercises and training." She [referred](#) several times to the "more than \$200 million" in aid that the U.S. government had provided Tajikistan to secure its border and expressed concern about restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

The State Department has designated Tajikistan as a CPC repeatedly since 2016, [most recently](#) in December 2019, but has maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"