

## TAJIKISTAN

The religious freedom situation in Tajikistan has deteriorated sharply over the past several years. Tajikistan is a weak state with a highly corrupt government that suppresses and punishes all religious activity independent of state control. The government's restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief primarily affect the country's majority Muslim community, but also target minority communities viewed as foreign-influenced, particularly Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses. In recent years, the Tajik government has destroyed a synagogue, a church, and three mosques, and has shut down nearly 75 mosques, including 50 in early 2011. Based on these concerns, USCIRF continues to keep Tajikistan on its Watch List in 2011. Tajikistan has been on the Watch List since 2009.

### BACKGROUND

Tajikistan was the only former Soviet republic to suffer a civil war (1992-1997) and the fighting pitted former Communists against democratic and Islamic political parties. While peace has prevailed since the ending of hostilities, echoes of the conflict and concerns about security influence the government's treatment of religious freedom. Muslims are subject to particularly strict restrictions by the government. Tajik officials monitor mosques and their adherents for possible extremist and anti-government views and restrict Muslim religious dress. The Tajik government also sets controls on Islamic clergy, such as controlling the content of sermons, and singles out mosques for particularly strict regulations including stipulating quotas for the maximum number of mosques in any given area. The government enacted a highly restrictive religion law that represses the free practice of Islam in March 2009 and increased its enforcement of the law after the February 2010 parliamentary elections. The law places onerous burdens on religious groups that have the effect of preventing or controlling religious activity. Unregistered religious activity is deemed illegal, with penalties including the forced closure of houses of worship. In order to register, some religious groups must provide burdensome and intrusive levels of information. Religious groups must specify all their activities in their charters and report annually on their activities or face loss of registration. The 2009 law also prohibits private religious education, requires state permission for an institution or organization to provide religious instruction, and requires that both parents provide written permission for a child to receive such instruction. The government also places restrictions on religious minorities including Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, and Jews.

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

The government of Tajikistan continues to enforce a restrictive legal framework that curtails the freedom of religion or belief of many Tajiks, especially Muslims. The government also has curbed the freedom of religion of Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Protestants and continues to limit access to religious literature and religious education.

**Restrictive Legal Framework:** The 2009 Tajik religion law criminalizes unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and proselytism; sets strict limits on the number of mosques as well their size; allows government interference with the appointment of imams; requires official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign co-religionists; and imposes state controls on the publication and import of religious literature. In January 2011 alone, the government closed about 50 mosques in the capital, Dushanbe. Tajikistan also has a 2007 Law on Observing National Traditions and Rituals that restricts the manner in which individuals can conduct private celebrations, allegedly to protect the public from spending excessive amounts of money. A draft measure under consideration would ban minors from any organized religious activity except funerals.

**Restrictions on Muslims:** Tajik officials monitor mosques and their adherents for possible extremist and anti-government views; place restrictions on Muslim religious dress; control the age and the numbers of those who participate in the *hajj* (religious pilgrimage); and indirectly control the selection and retention of imams and the content of their sermons. Women are not permitted to go to mosques or wear headscarves in educational institutions, and men are not allowed to wear beards in public buildings. In May 2010, the Tajik Interior Ministry launched "Operation *Madrasa*," targeted mainly at individuals teaching Islam to children and youth without official licenses. This effort included police raids of "illegal" (unregistered) private Koran lessons. In 2010, Tajik courts jailed at least 59 people for terms of three to eight years, and fined at least 33 others for alleged membership in *Tabligh Jamaat*, an Islamic missionary group which the State

Department has reported to be non-violent. The Tajik government recently has closed dozens of unregistered mosques and prayer rooms, and ordered the demolition of three unregistered mosques in Dushanbe.

**Restrictions on Religious Minorities:** The Tajik government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 2007 for allegedly causing "discontent" among the people, and for their conscientious objection to military service and refusal to allow blood transfusions. In 2009, after a raid, as many as 17 Jehovah's Witnesses were criminally charged for "inciting inter-religious hatred." As of March 2011, these charges, which carry a possible prison term of between five and nine years, remain pending. In 2008, the Tajik government temporarily halted the activity of the Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life Christian Center, two Protestant churches in Dushanbe. The Ehyo Church was allowed to resume its activity in late 2008, but the Abundant Life Christian Center decided in May 2008 to close permanently due to official restrictions. In 2008, the nation's only synagogue, located in Dushanbe, was bulldozed. Dushanbe's Jewish community later received a building that is now being used for worship services.

**Restrictions on Religious Literature and Education:** The government must approve the production, import, export, sale, and distribution of religious literature and other items from religious groups authorized to undertake these activities. The literature and other items must carry the registered religious group's full name. These rules effectively ban religious groups that are not represented by a registered religious organization from private or commercial publishing. The Ministry of Culture has confiscated religious literature it deems inappropriate, including from the Jehovah's Witnesses; a Jehovah's Witness reported that three tons of confiscated Jehovah's Witnesses literature was destroyed in early 2010 after three years of open storage caused the literature become "decayed and unusable." Restrictions also are placed on religious education; a state license is required to conduct religious instruction, and both parents must give written permission for children between seven and 18 to receive such instruction. Additionally, local mosques are not permitted to set up educational groups; only large central mosques and smaller central mosques are allowed to do so.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

Tajikistan is strategically important for the United States due to its long and porous border with Afghanistan to the south and the key role ethnic Tajiks play in that country. U.S. policy toward Tajikistan should place greater priority on freedom of religion or belief, particularly in light of Tajikistan's civil war and the effect on religious repression for regional security. The U.S. government should:

- Press Tajik officials and work with civil society to bring the 2009 religion law and other relevant laws into conformity with international commitments, including those on freedom of religion or belief and publicly criticize violations by the Tajik government of its international and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) human rights commitments, particularly at the upcoming October 2011 UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Tajikistan;
- Oppose the draft law on parental responsibility that would exclude children from organized religion;
- Continue to monitor the trials of those charged on the grounds of religious affiliation or belief, and work with the international community to provide training for judges and prosecutors in civil law and human rights standards; and
- 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 establishing and implementing a specific timetable for the government to take concrete steps to reform the religion law and improve conditions of freedom of religion or belief.

**Please see USCIRF's 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Tajikistan.**