



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: TAJIKISTAN

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

By Mollie Blum, Researcher

The Repression of Religious Freedom in Authoritarian Tajikistan

Overview

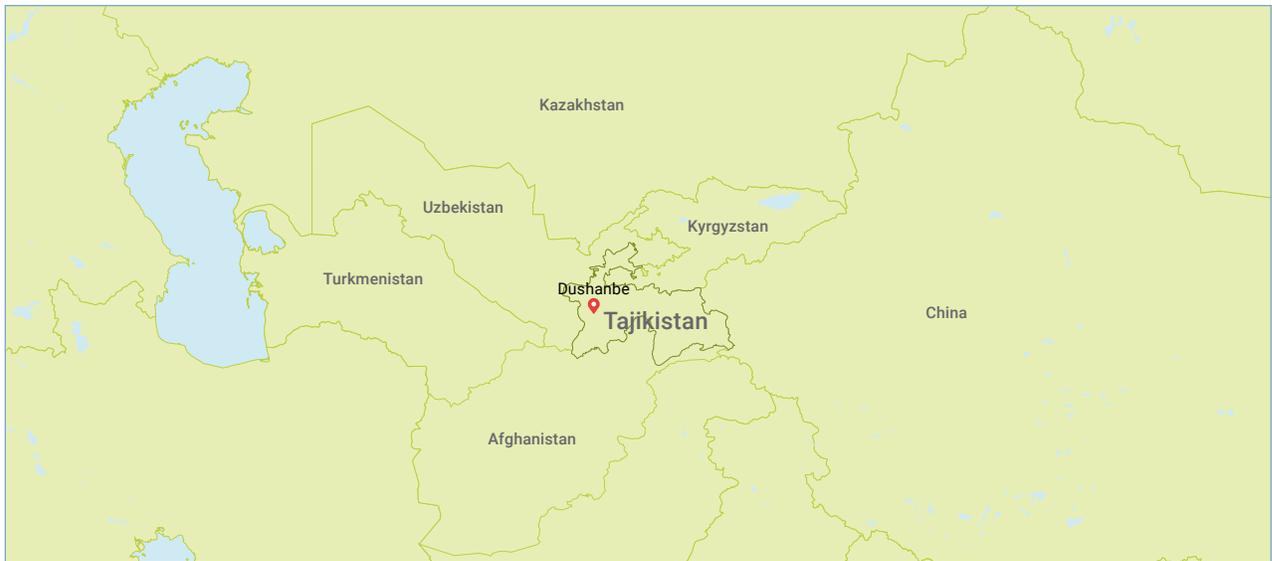
As part of an effort to maintain complete, authoritarian control over all segments of society, the government of Tajikistan commits systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The Tajik government has placed undue restrictions on all facets of religious practice, including prayer, celebrations, education, and rituals. Those who fail to comply with Tajikistan's regulations can face severe penalties. While Tajikistan's religious freedom violations negatively impact all religious groups, they especially target the Hanafi Sunni Muslim majority.

In April 2023, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, conducted a fact-finding mission to Tajikistan to investigate the religious freedom situation and *found* that "the spectrum of the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief falls alarmingly short of the scope of guarantees in international human rights law." Since 2012, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has *recommended* that the U.S. Department of State designate Tajikistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom. While the *State Department* has followed USCIRF's recommendation beginning in 2016, the CPC designation has been accompanied by a waiver given the "important national interest of the United States" that relieves the U.S. government from taking otherwise legislatively mandated presidential action.

The following country update provides an overview of religious freedom conditions and developments in Tajikistan. It details the legal framework regulating religion, the situation of Sunni and Ismaili Shi'a Muslims, issues impacting Christian communities, and cases of transnational repression.

Legal Framework for Religion in Tajikistan

Several laws, including the administrative and criminal codes, regulate religion in Tajikistan. The law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (religion law) *regulates* all religious activity in Tajikistan and includes specific provisions governing the activities of Muslims. While the religion law purports to guarantee freedom of conscience and religion for all Tajik citizens, it recognizes the "special



role” of Hanafi Islam. However, the religion law includes restrictive provisions that do not comply with international human rights standards such as the prohibition of unregistered religious activities, limits on religious education both in Tajikistan and abroad, restrictions on religious materials, and specific, discriminatory requirements for registering mosques and appointing Muslim religious leaders.

The law on Resistance to Extremism (extremism law) *aims* to prevent “extremism” but fails to adequately define the term. Various government bodies are charged with addressing “extremism”; for example, the Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) is tasked with analyzing religious activities, investigating religious associations operating without registration, and regulating religious education. The Ministry of Justice is tasked with maintaining a list of banned “extremist” organizations, which includes nonviolent religious organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat. It has additionally banned Salafism, which the CRA in May 2023 *characterized* as a “direct threat to society.” Moreover, in 2015 Tajik authorities placed on the list of banned organizations the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a political party rooted in Islamic values that opposed President Emomali Rahmon’s rule and sought to positively reform Tajikistan by fostering human rights, rule of law, and democracy. Oftentimes charges of “extremism,” terrorism, or belonging to the “Salafi” movement are used interchangeably to target the peaceful religious activities of Muslims.

The law on the Regulation of Traditions and Ceremonies (traditions law) *regulates* religious ceremonies and seeks to protect “traditional” values and prevent citizens’ excessive spending. The law restricts the location, time, and duration of events, the number of guests permitted to attend, and the amount of food the host can provide, among other aspects of social gatherings.

Finally, the law on Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children (parental responsibility law) *prohibits* children from participating in activities of religious associations. The law also reiterates that parents must ensure that their child obtains permission from the state, as required in the religion law, if the child wants to study religion abroad.

Sunni Muslims

While the CRA regulates all religions, Hanafi Sunni Muslims, who make up 95 percent of Tajikistan’s Muslim population, also fall under the authority of the Islamic Council of Ulema. The Ulema Council is a nominally independent body that guides the practice of religion based on its interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam by issuing fatwas, training and appointing imams, overseeing the import of religious materials, and selecting a mufti, along with other activities. The CRA also manages Sunni institutions by approving the registration of mosques and working with the Ulema Council to approve imams, prepare Friday sermons, and even *create* a uniform for imams. Both bodies support the policies of President Rahmon’s administration that serve to mute the influence of Islam and strengthen the president’s authority. For example, prior to the 2015 *ban*

on the IRPT, the Ulema Council helped sow societal disdain for the religious political party by having local imams [give](#) sermons with anti-IRPT propaganda. Several restrictions on religious practices specifically target Muslims. In August and September 2022, authorities temporarily [closed](#) all Islamic bookstores in Dushanbe for allegedly violating the religion law. The bookstores resumed operations by the end of the year. In 2004, a fatwa [banned](#) women from attending mosque and a 2005 Ministry of Education decree [banned](#) them from wearing hijabs in schools. Additionally, a 2017 CRA decree [dictated](#) how to mourn at funerals, prohibiting deeply meaningful and oftentimes religious expressions of grief such as loudly crying, pulling one's hair, beating one's head, or wearing black. In June 2022, local authorities [detained](#) and tortured a woman who wore black to mourn her son's death. When she lodged a complaint, the police threatened her with 15 days of jail time. Furthermore, in a 2017 speech, President Rahmon [encouraged](#) people not to wear hijabs, black dresses, or beards, which led to a widespread official [campaign](#) targeting individuals perceived as religious based on their appearance. Although such campaigns have slowed, authorities still sporadically force men to shave their beards, coerce women to remove their hijabs, and use negative rhetoric to discourage such practices. In April 2023, Abdullo Rahmonzoda, the head of the Committee for Youth and Sports, [advised](#) bloggers to not grow beards or promote them online because such actions could be interpreted as sympathizing with terrorist groups and threaten national security.

The Tajik government also has targeted Islamic education. There are virtually no [operating](#) madrasas left in Tajikistan. Moreover, the government continues to strictly enforce state approval mechanisms for imams. In October 2023, the CRA [warned](#) that an unauthorized imam provided funeral services in Hisar city in place of the state appointed imam. Authorities are reportedly investigating whether the unauthorized imam “degraded the dignity of the dead body.” In November 2023, the CRA [announced](#) it was investigating an individual who reportedly addressed a mosque congregation in the absence of the state appointed imam.

The Tajik government also regularly fines individuals for violating the traditions law related to their Islamic religious practices. As reported by the CRA, in the first six months of 2023, officials [conducted](#) over 12,000 raids on various types of ceremonies and found 419 violations of the law. For example, in January 2023, the Vahdat

city court [fined](#) an individual an unknown amount for providing food at a religious ceremony.

Alleged violations of the law can also result in imprisonment. USCIRF maintains a [database](#) of religious prisoners of conscience, which includes nine individuals imprisoned in Tajikistan, most of whom subscribe to Sunni Islam. The charges brought against these individuals are part of the government's campaign to silence any opposition to President Rahmon's authority, which prioritizes tight control over everything that could influence society, including religion. As Hanafi Sunni Islam is the religion of most of the population, Sunni Muslims are the largest target of government repression. Authorities went after many of the individuals listed in USCIRF's database for stepping outside the confines of the state's preferred version of Islam. For example, in March 2023, imam [Mukhammad Mukharramov](#) was sentenced to eight years in prison for the “organization of an extremist association” when he taught Islam to a small group of Muslims. In June 2021, imam [Mahmadsodyk Sayidov](#) was sentenced to five years in prison for “participating in an extremist religious organization” after he refused to give the state-provided sermon at his mosque. Together with Sayidov, authorities also arrested [Abdugafor Rajabov](#) and [Aslamkhon Karimov](#) because they happened to be attending the mosque when Sayidov gave his unauthorized sermon. Both men were sentenced to five years in prison on extremism charges.

Persecution of Ismaili Shi'a Pamiris in Gorno Badakhshan

The Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) consists mostly of ethnic Pamiris who subscribe to Ismaili Shi'a Islam and make up around 3 percent of the total population of the country. During Tajikistan's civil war from 1992 to 1997, Pamiris comprised part of the opposition and have maintained a tumultuous relationship with the Tajik government ever since. The government has struggled to establish its authority in the difficult to access region and has sent in police and military forces to crack down on the population through extrajudicial killings, torture, and jailings. In November 2021, protests erupted when Tajik military forces killed a local man. The government response to the protests was violent and culminated in an “[anti-terrorism operation](#)” that led to deaths, arrests, torture, and prison sentences without fair or open trials. The government also ramped up a campaign to target ethnic Pamiris and clamped down on existing freedoms in GBAO, which has included

the increased restriction and penalization of Ismaili Shi'a religious activity.

One of the ways that the government has suppressed Ismaili Shi'a Muslims is by targeting the activities of their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, and the Aga Khan foundation, which provides many necessary social services in GBAO. For example, the government has prohibited the Aga Khan from entering Tajikistan since 2012. In addition, authorities have pressed locals to remove portraits of the Aga Khan from their homes and replace them with photos of President Rahmon. Notably, the government has also *nationalized* and revoked the licenses of various Aga Khan institutions.

Authorities have also *targeted* Ismaili religious practices. For example, in January 2023, authorities told locals that students could no longer study at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, the premiere educational institution for Ismailis. Authorities allegedly shut down all Ismaili prayer houses in GBAO—except for one prayer house in Khorog—and the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB). ITREB teachers have *reported* receiving summonses to police stations and being subjected to questioning. Authorities have also threatened to imprison anyone who holds prayer services in their home while local officials have fined at least two individuals in 2023 for holding unauthorized prayer services. In April 2023, President Rahmon issued a *decree* banning funerals for those killed in “anti-terrorism operations,” which authorities have reportedly violently enforced. In July 2022, prominent local cleric *Muzaffar Davlatmirov* was arrested for leading funeral services for three local leaders killed by police and was later sentenced to five years in prison on extremism charges.

Targeting of Christian Communities

About 0.7 percent of the population *identifies* as Christian, with most belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church. Compared to other Christian groups present in the country, the Russian Orthodox Church does not experience much official repression, in large part because Orthodox Christians do not proselytize and because of the church's connections to Russia. Meanwhile, other Christian groups such as Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses report difficulties obtaining registration, harassment from government officials, and restrictions on their religious activities.

For example, in May 2022, an official announced that no new churches would be registered and reminded that those under 18 cannot participate in church

activities, including religious camps. Since that announcement, the *number* of registered non-Islamic religious associations (66) has remained unchanged. An estimated 20 Protestant groups *want* registration but do not have it, so they are forced to operate secretly with the risk of state retaliation at any time. Other groups, such as some Baptist communities, refuse to register due to their religious beliefs. Although Baptists in Dushanbe do not typically have issues with authorities, those outside of the capital face harassment. Even those groups with registration face harassment and undue restrictions on their religious activities. For example, religious communities have long been forced to complete questionnaires regarding their religious activities. In August 2022, officials announced that all registered non-Muslim religious organizations must have their employees *complete* detailed questionnaires and provide personal and financial information for themselves and their families. Some fear the information will be used to target future religious activities.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Since 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned as an extremist organization in Tajikistan and the government has denied repeated registration attempts by the group. In an April 2022 communication to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRCtee) regarding a Russian Jehovah's Witness in Tajikistan, the Tajik government revealed that Jehovah's Witnesses were banned once again in March 2021. The UNHRCtee concluded that Tajikistan's refusal to register Jehovah's Witnesses violated their human rights under international law, which prompted Jehovah's Witnesses to attempt to register again. Despite the UNHRCtee decision, authorities again rejected their application to register in April 2023, a decision the Supreme Court later upheld in August 2023.

Jehovah's Witnesses also face intense harassment from authorities, including home raids, fines, surveillance, and brief detentions. For example, in February 2023, authorities questioned a Jehovah's Witness about belonging to an “extremist organization.” In April 2023, authorities asked the family of a Jehovah's Witness who had previously been imprisoned for his religious conscientious objection if they still belonged to an “extremist organization.” In June 2023, local officers harassed a Jehovah's Witness to provide information about other Witnesses. Also in June, authorities detained and questioned two Jehovah's Witnesses for proselytizing

and fined them for “inciting religious hatred.” In 2019, Tajik authorities arrested then 69-year-old [Shamil Khakimov](#) for his peaceful religious activities. Khakimov suffered from several health issues, but he never received proper medical treatment in prison and his condition worsened. Khakimov was released on May 16, 2023, after serving his full prison sentence.

Transnational Repression

Tajikistan is one of the world’s worst [perpetrators](#) of transnational repression. Throughout his rule, President Rahmon has increasingly used transnational repression to target those who express criticism of or oppose his leadership. Among those who are targeted include human rights defenders, members of the political opposition, journalists, and religious figures and individuals, including those who seek religious education abroad. Oftentimes, authorities level charges of promoting “extremism” or adhering to “Salafism” indiscriminately to punish dissent. Many Pamiris and alleged IRPT members who fled Tajikistan due to religious and political persecution at home have been the targets of transnational repression.

Most cases of transnational repression take place in Russia, a close ally of Tajikistan and a country where many Tajik nationals work, but some instances have also occurred throughout Europe. In Russia, in cooperation with Tajik security services, Russian authorities have forcibly disappeared individuals by request of the Tajik government. For example, in December 2018, former local IRPT leader, Naimjon Samiev, was forcibly [disappeared](#) in Chechnya and taken to Tajikistan where a court sentenced him to 15 years in prison on politically motivated “extremism” charges. In another case in July 2022, two Pamiri rights activists living in Russia, Oraz and Ramzi Vazirbekov, were [disappeared](#) and taken to Tajikistan against their will. A court in Dushanbe later sentenced both men to 16 and 13 years in prison, respectively, on falsified “extremism” and criminal association charges.

Individuals in Europe have faced threats of detention, arrest, deportation, and extradition, particularly in connection with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) Red Notice system. The Tajik government abuses INTERPOL by submitting fraudulent requests for its citizens on alleged “extremism” charges. The Tajik government also pressures dissidents to return home voluntarily by harassing and imprisoning their family members in Tajikistan. Upon return to Tajikistan,

such individuals are often sentenced to prison, where torture is common practice, without a fair or open trial. For example, in March 2020, Hizbullo Shovalizoda, an alleged IRPT member, was [extradited](#) from Austria to Tajikistan after an Austrian court rejected his asylum application. A Tajik court later sentenced Shovalizoda to 20 years in prison on “extremism” charges. Also, the Tajik government attempted to lure exiled Tajik blogger Sherzod Mamadjonov back to the country. Mamadjonov lives in Germany and is an outspoken critic of Tajikistan’s restrictive policies towards Muslims. The Tajik government has resorted to harassing his mother, [Shohida Mamadjonova](#), by repeatedly summoning her to the police station to force her to convince her son to return home. In February 2022, Shohida went to a police station to retrieve her phone after the police confiscated it during a previous summons. During her visit, she was disappeared and a few days later the Interior Ministry announced that it had detained Shohida on suspicion of “organizing extremist activities.” Officials later sentenced Shohida to six years in prison.

Conclusion

The government of Tajikistan blatantly violates freedom of religion or belief as defined in international human rights law in pursuit of greater authoritarian control over all segments of society. As a result, the religious freedom landscape in Tajikistan is virtually non-existent, negatively impacting all religious groups in the country.

As recommended in USCIRF’s 2023 [Annual Report](#) chapter on Tajikistan, the U.S. government should lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of Tajikistan’s CPC designation. In addition, aid to Tajikistan should be conditional on efforts to bring religious freedom conditions in line with international human rights standards. The U.S. government should also impose targeted sanctions on Tajik government agencies and officials responsible for severe religious freedom violations. Finally, the U.S. government should press the Tajik government at the highest levels to release religious prisoners of conscience.



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Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino
Policy Analyst

Danielle Ashbahian
Chief of Public Affairs

Keely Bakken
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai
Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum
Researcher

Elizabeth K. Cassidy
Director of Research & Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Senior Policy Analyst

Patrick Greenwalt
Policy Analyst

Sema Hasan
Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer
Chief Administrative Officer

Veronica McCarthy
Public Affairs Associate

Hilary Miller
Researcher

Nora Morton
Operations Specialist

Dylan Schexnaydre
Researcher

Jamie Staley
Supervisory Policy Advisor

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Luke Wilson
Researcher

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

www.USCIRF.gov

@USCIRF

Media@USCIRF.gov

732 N. Capitol Street, NW, Suite #A714

Washington, DC 20401

202-523-3240