



TAJIKISTAN

Key Findings

Systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom continue in Tajikistan. The government suppresses and punishes all religious activity independent of state control, particularly the activities of Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The government also imprisons individuals on unproven criminal allegations linked to Islamic religious activity and affiliation. Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned since 2007. There are no legal provisions on conscientious objection to military service. For these reasons, USCIRF again recommends in 2014 that Tajikistan be designated as a country of particular concern (CPC). USCIRF first recommended that Tajikistan be designated a CPC in 2012. Tajikistan had been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2009.

Background

The government's recent actions against peaceful religious practice are part of a five-year barrage of repressive laws limiting religious freedom. The 2009 religion law establishes onerous and intrusive registration requirements for religious groups; criminalizes unregistered religious activity as well as private religious education and proselytism; sets strict limits on the number and size of mosques; 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 content, publication and import of religious materials.

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 and organizing or participating in a "religious extremist study group." In addition, a 2011 law on parental responsibility banned minors from any organized religious activity except funerals and in

official religious institutions. In August 2013, the UN Human Rights Committee called on the Tajikistan government to "repeal or amend all provisions" of the religion law, the parental responsibility law and the administrative code that "disproportionally restrict" its UN obligations. It also called on Tajikistan to "reverse its discriminatory refusal to register certain religious denominations;" to legally recognize the right to conscientious objection, and to amend provisions limiting religious education.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014

Official Control of and Restrictions on Muslims

Tajik officials monitor mosques and their attendees for possible extremist and anti-government views; 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 law bans private religious education . . .

the wearing of headscarves in educational institutions, and bans teachers from wearing beards in public buildings. In 2005, the semi-official Council of Ulema banned women from attending mosque services, ostensibly due to a lack of separate prayer spaces for men and women. President Emomali Rahmon instructed the Ministry of Finance and the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) to begin paying the salaries of the imams of cathedral mosques by February 2014. Reportedly, growing numbers of Tajik women are protesting that their taxes will now be used to pay salaries for imams in mosques that they are not allowed to attend. Rahmon

also instructed the Council of Ulema to adopt a standard uniform for imams. The SCRA instructed imams across Tajikistan to preach against “nontraditional sexual relations” in 2014.

Abuses against Members of the Islamic Renaissance Party

Tajikistan has the only post-Soviet Islamist political party with legal status, which was given as part of the country’s post-civil war peace settlement. In April 2013, Mahmatali Hayit, deputy head of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was severely beaten by unknown assailants. In January 2014, Umedjon Tojiev, 34, an IRPT 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. The IRPT and various Tajik human rights groups allege that the Tajik police and security services engage in maltreatment and torture of detainees and prisoners.

Restrictions on Houses of Worship

Tajik law sets strict limits on the numbers of mosques permitted, and in recent years the government has closed hundreds of unregistered mosques and prayer rooms and demolished three unregistered mosques in Dushanbe. A Dushanbe city official told the Forum 18 News Service in 2013 that people had been told not to use certain mosques for worship; it was not clear what measures would be taken if worship continued. In 2008, the nation’s only synagogue, located in Dushanbe, was bulldozed. The Dushanbe Jewish community later received a building (donated by President Rakhmon’s brother-in-law, one of Tajikistan’s richest bankers) that it uses for worship but does not own. In July 2013, after

in 2009 and Tajikistan announced that one of the world’s largest mosques, funded by Qatar, will open in Dushanbe in 2014.

Restrictions on Religious Minorities

In 2007, the Tajik government banned Jehovah’s Witnesses for allegedly causing “discontent” among the people and for their conscientious objection to military service. In September 2013 a court fined a Jehovah’s Witness the equivalent of USD70 for discussing religion on a street in Dushanbe. Tajik authorities allowed the previously-closed Ahoy Church to resume its activity in late 2008, but the Abundant Life Christian Center remains closed. In August 2013, the UN Human Rights Council noted its “particular concern” at the absolute ban of several religious denominations, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, and certain Muslim and Christian groups.

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 December 2013, five of Tajikistan’s six officially-approved *madrasas* (Muslim religious schools) remained closed, the

Restrictions primarily affect the majority Muslim community.

he publicly asked President Rakhmon for land to build a new mosque, Ubaydullo Khasanov, former Chief Imam in Vossei district of the Khatlon Region, was fired by the SCRA. In contrast, the Aga Khan Cultural Center, Central Asia’s first Ismaili center, opened in Dushanbe

Forum 18 News Service reported; their 300 students in the northern Sogd Region must study in non-religious public schools. Tajik authorities now allow only one *madrasa* to operate, in Tursonzade, near Dushanbe. During a July 4, 2013 address to religious leaders and

local government officials, President Rahmon warned that “extremism and fanaticism is prospering, and moreover terrorism has appeared in society,” and claimed that some graduates of religious schools later became terrorists.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

For the past decade, U.S. policy in Central Asia was dominated by the Afghan war, and human rights and religious freedom were not major concerns. USCIRF believes that this policy was shortsighted. The evolving regional geopolitical situation may or may not create new security imperatives for the United States, but USCIRF urges the U.S. government to prioritize religious freedom and related human rights in Tajikistan. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government designate Tajikistan as a CPC, USCIRF recommends the U.S. government should:

- Press Tajik officials to 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 criticize publicly violations by the Tajik government of those commitments;
- Continue to monitor the trials of those charged on account of their religious affiliation, and work with the international community, particularly the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to provide training for the judiciary in civil law and human rights standards;
- 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;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy maintains active contacts with human rights activists and press 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

- Re-establish funding for the State Department’s Title VIII program for research, including on religious freedom and human rights, as well as for language programs related to the study of Eurasia.