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TAJIKISTAN

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Back to Tajikistan

TAJIKISTAN 2022

Tens of ethnic Pamiri protesters were killed by security forces as demonstrations were violently suppressed and an “anti-terrorist operation” was launched in the east of the country. Activists, local leaders, journalists and bloggers were arrested and sentenced in unfair trials. Many reported being tortured. Access to information, including through the media and internet, remained heavily restricted. Domestic violence remained widespread with victims rarely securing justice or support. Afghan refugees continued to be detained and deported.

Background

Tajikistan’s economic and political life continued to be tightly controlled by the president, in the 30th year of his rule, and his family.

Over 100 people, including dozens of civilians, were killed and homes, schools and markets destroyed during cross border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in September.

In May, following months of targeted repression by the central government, longstanding tensions in the eastern Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) between these authorities and the Pamiris, a small, unrecognized ethnic minority belonging to the Shia Islam Ismaili community, flared into new protests. These were brutally suppressed by the authorities, who launched an "anti-terrorist operation" on 18 May during which tens of Pamiris were killed over several weeks. Over 200 people were arrested.

Right to life and security of the person

The official government figure in May for those killed in the "anti-terrorist operation" in the GBAO was originally 21, although unofficial sources reported more than double that number. The circumstances of many deaths, in the absence of independent reporting from Tajikistan, prompted allegations of extrajudicial executions. Prominent activists, informal local leaders, poets, religious leaders and journalists were arbitrarily targeted for arrest.

Several prominent members of the Pamiri diaspora in Russia were abducted before resurfacing in custody in Tajikistan. By the end of the year, most of those arrested had been sentenced to long prison terms in unfair trials, typically for purported membership of a criminal organization and seeking to overthrow the constitutional order. The fate and whereabouts of some of those arrested remained unknown, prompting fears that they had been forcibly disappeared.

Economic, social and cultural rights

The crackdown on prominent Pamiri influencers, local leaders and activists was accompanied by a broader assault on the cultural heritage of Pamiris. Following the May-June unrest, the authorities shut down and confiscated the property of multiple local organizations linked to the Aga Khan Development Network working in the fields of education, economic development and religious instruction.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression remained severely curtailed. The few remaining independent media outlets, human rights defenders and bloggers were heavily targeted in the crackdown that followed the GBAO protests.

On 17 May, Mullorajab Yusufi and Anushervon Aripov, journalists working for Radio Free Europe's Tajik service and regional news outlet Current Time, were severely beaten by unknown assailants in the capital, Dushanbe, shortly after interviewing the well-known Pamiri journalist and human rights activist Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva about events in the GBAO.

The next day Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva was herself arrested and accused of "publicly calling for the overthrow of the constitutional order". In December, she was sentenced to 21 years' imprisonment following a closed, unfair trial. Following her arrest, the authorities ordered Asia-Plus, the privately owned news agency for which she reported, to cease covering events in the GBAO. Other outlets reported similar coercion.

On 19 May, Pamiri blogger and journalist Khushruz Jumayev (known online as Khush Gulyam) was arrested. He was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in December on opaque charges relating to the May events in the GBAO.

Other activists who faced unfair trials during the year included around a dozen members of Commission 44, an independent group of lawyers and human rights defenders established to investigate the November 2021 killing of an activist that sparked protests in the GBAO. Shaftolu Bekdavlatov and Khujamri Pirmamadov were sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment each on charges of organizing a criminal group and receiving financial assistance from abroad. The head of the Pamiri Lawyers' Association, Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment on 9 December.

Journalists and bloggers also faced prosecutions for critical reporting unrelated to the GBAO. On 15 June, two journalists and collaborators who reported widely on economic and social rights violations, Daler Imomali and Avazmad Gurbatov (also known as Abdullo Gurbati), were arrested shortly after reporting on the demolition of homes in Dushanbe.

Avazmad Gurbatov was sentenced on 4 October to seven-and-a-half years' imprisonment in a closed trial on trumped-up charges of assaulting a police officer and membership of the arbitrarily banned political organization Group 24. In a separate trial two weeks later, Daler Imomali was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, on equally far-fetched charges of tax evasion, disseminating false information and purported membership of Group 24.

The internet was completely shut down for the first few months of the year in the GBAO and only intermittently and partially restored during the rest of the year. Tight restrictions remained in place throughout the country.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread both as a means of intimidation and extracting confessions. Prisoners continued to report abuse and neglect, including beatings, lack of access to food and water and cold and wet conditions within the cells.

While in pretrial detention following his arrest in July, Abdusattor Pirmuhammadzoda, a blogger who had been fired from a state radio broadcaster for criticizing the government in 2020, managed to smuggle out a letter in which he described being subjected to severe beatings, electric shocks and psychological torture, including threats against his family, in order to secure a confession. He was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in November.

In June, while trying to attend a concert in a public park in Dushanbe, Elobat Oghalykova was arrested for wearing a black dress in mourning for the death of one of her sons – a traditional practice that was banned in 2017. She was beaten at Spitamen District Police station and required hospitalization. When she filed a complaint, she was threatened with 15 days' detention for disobeying a police officer.

Women's and girls' rights

According to multiple indicators published during the year, including the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report, Tajikistan's gender gap was the highest of all Central Asian countries and one of the highest globally.

According to a survey published by the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative in June, 77.3% of respondents considered violence against women to be prevalent in Tajikistan and 34% of respondents (across both genders) believed it was justifiable to beat a partner who refused to obey. The accompanying report highlighted many longstanding problems: the weak legal framework; the limited range and inadequate funding of protection services; and stereotypical attitudes among public service providers, including law enforcement agencies. A draft criminal code criminalizing domestic violence, put before parliament in 2021, had not been passed by the end of the year.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

In August, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, raised grave concerns about the continued detention and deportation of Afghan refugees. The agency documented dozens of cases in August and September alone. Members of the nearly 14,000-

strong Afghan refugee community reported that the forced expulsions were taking place without any procedure or obvious justification.