

World Report 2023



Tajikistan

Events of 2022

Participants wave flags during Independence Day celebrations in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on September 8, 2022.

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The government of Tajikistan intensified its crackdown on human rights and fundamental freedoms in 2022, violently repressing peaceful gatherings in the Gorno Badakshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) and using trumped-up charges against human rights defenders in retaliation for their professional activities.

The crackdown in GBAO was sparked by demonstrations against persecution of the Pamiri ethnic minority by regional and national authorities. Journalists and bloggers outside GBAO were targeted for their coverage of the events and the “anti-terrorist” special operation in GBAO that followed in June, as well as for critical reportage of the government.

Dozens of members and leaders of banned opposition parties remain behind bars on politically motivated charges. Domestic violence against women and girls remains prevalent. Tajikistan also engaged in a military conflict with the neighboring Kyrgyzstan, with dozens of civilians killed and hundreds injured.

Crisis in Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Region

Between November 2021 and June 2022, at least 40 people were killed as a result of actions by security forces in GBAO to quash protests by the region's population over perceived harassment and persecution.

Tajik authorities labeled the protests "illegal," alleging they were organized by criminal groups with connections to terrorist organizations. Media reported that police on at least one occasion violently dispersed protesters using rubber bullets and teargas with military support deployed from the capital, Dushanbe. In the military's subsequent "anti-terrorism operation" at least 46 people were arrested, and hundreds more face charges or have been brought to trial for participation in the protests.

Since 2012, the region has seen regular violent stand-offs between the population and the military, and continued harassment and persecution of the Pamiri—a distinct ethnic and religious minority that populates GBAO.

Civil Society

In May, a human rights defender and journalist from GBAO and ethnic Pamiri, Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, was detained on charges of organizing the May protests, alleging it was an

attempt to overthrow the constitutional order. Soon after her detention, Mamadshoeva was seen in a broadcast on state television, where she appeared to admit to organizing the protests and apologized for causing distress to residents of GBAO. While the interview was clearly recorded while in detention, the exact circumstances in which it was filmed are unclear. In December Mamadshoeva was sentenced to [21 years](#) of imprisonment.

In May, at least 13 members of “Commission 44,” an independent group established in GBAO in 2021 to investigate the November protests, were detained and interrogated. Seven members were subsequently released, but in June, two received lengthy prison terms of 18 years on charges of organizing a criminal association and receiving financial assistance from abroad.

In July, a Tajik internet activist Shodruz Akhrorov, who was deported from Russia in March for allegedly violating residence rules, was sentenced by a Dushanbe court to six years in prison on charges of “calling for extremism via the internet.” Akhrorov published videos critical of the lack of support for Tajik migrant workers in Russia on the part of Tajik authorities.

Freedom of Expression

Authorities continued to severely restrict freedom of expression online and offline, prosecuting journalists, bloggers, and activists for expressing their views and for independent reporting. In contrast to recent years the charges applied have included “extremism,” “terrorism,” and “calls to violent change to constitutional order,” all of which come with extremely long prison sentences. There is heavy media censorship and persecution of the few independent media outlets.

Journalists and activists covering the protests in GBAO in particular were targeted, among them independent journalists Khushom Gulom and Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, who were detained without due process, and have in December been sentenced to 8 and 21 years of imprisonment. Four journalists from Radio Ozodi and Current Time media outlets were attacked after interviewing Mamadshoeva, with unidentified attackers stealing their equipment and mobile phones, severely beating and threatening to kill one of them. After receiving a warning from the Prosecutor General’s Office, an independent media outlet, Asia Plus, announced it would no longer cover the events in GBAO; it was threatened with closure for alleged “one-sided” coverage of the protests.

Two bloggers, Daleri Imomali and Abdullo Ghurbati, known for their critical coverage of state institutions and investigative journalism pieces covering the rest of Tajikistan, were detained in June and at time of writing remained behind bars. They are charged with “participation in activities of banned political parties and organizations” under Article 307 of the Criminal Code. Official representatives of the two banned parties—Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and Group 24—refuted this accusation.

Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of RFE/RL, is restricted in its professional activities by the refusal of the Foreign Ministry to issue long-term accreditation to its journalists, contrary to the terms of Tajik legislation on media accreditation.

Journalists who run the independent Azda TV in exile report ongoing pressure on their relatives in Tajikistan by the Tajik security services, including threats of criminal cases and to limit their freedom to leave the country.

Kidnappings and Forced Disappearances

The use of [renditions](#) targeting Pamiri diaspora leaders in Russia increased between November 2021

and August 2022 with at least 7 activists forcibly disappeared and kidnapped to Tajikistan, including two ethnic Pamiris with Russian citizenship. All later re-appeared in Tajikistan, some making televised speeches in which they said they had returned to Tajikistan voluntarily. A diaspora group has raised concerns authorities may have tortured and otherwise abused them in detention.

Political Prisoners, Prison Conditions, and Torture

Leaders and members of the banned IRPT previously imprisoned to long or life prison sentences remain behind bars despite continued international calls for their release. One of the founders of IRPT, 80-year-old Zubaydullo Rozik, was placed in special punishment cells twice for providing religious education to other prisoners, which is illegal in Tajik prisons.

Tajik prisons continue to be ill-equipped and overcrowded, with prisoners routinely facing ill-treatment, despite an ongoing prison reform. There has been no genuine investigation and no accountability for the November 2018 and May 2019 prison riots in Khujand and Vahdat that resulted in the deaths of at least 50 prisoners and five prison

guards in circumstances that remain unclear, and the deaths in July 2019 of 14 prisoners by poisoning during a prison transfer.

As of September, at least 16 of the 70 detainees from the May protests in GBAO had received prison sentences ranging from 8 years to life sentences following closed trials. Many of them have complained to their relatives of torture and ill-treatment while in pretrial detention, according to a Pamiri news service.

Conflict at the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border

In September, Tajikistan engaged in a military conflict with Kyrgyzstan, resulting in the deaths of at least 18 civilians in Tajikistan, including at least 3 children. At least one school was damaged by fire during the conflict. Authorities reported scores of civilian homes had been burned, however no reports were available on how many people may have been internally displaced. Tajik authorities also claimed that Kyrgyz forces [allegedly](#) fired on an ambulance traveling not far from Isfara, near the Kyrgyz border, killing five members of a family, including two children, who were inside the vehicle. There has been no investigation and no accountability for

civilian deaths in the April 2021 conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence in Tajikistan remained prevalent, and the authorities have failed to effectively implement a 2013 law on the prevention of violence in the family. While the law offers some protection to survivors, it does not criminalize domestic violence or marital rape and does not include provisions for survivors to adequate support and protection.

Social stigma, economic dependence, impunity for perpetrators, lack of accessibility to protection measures for women with disabilities, including shelters, and insufficient number of shelters pose serious barriers for survivors' access to help, especially in rural areas. The Committee on Women and Family Affairs said that one of the main causes of suicide among women is domestic violence, as reported in the media.

Anti-Discrimination Legislation

Anti-discrimination legislation was passed by both the lower and upper chambers of Tajikistan's

parliament in June and July respectively, introducing into law concepts such as direct and indirect discrimination, sexual harassment, and segregation on a discriminatory basis. The law tasks the Ombudsman's Office as the authorized body responsible for implementation of the law, including conducting anti-discrimination assessments of future draft laws. However, the law excludes "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" as protected categories, although these concepts were included in the initial draft.

Key International Actors

In March at the 49th session of the UN Human Rights Council, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet noted the ongoing practice of suppressing political dissent in Tajikistan, and the widespread atmosphere of fear and repression in GBAO.

In May, the European Union delegation in Tajikistan jointly with the embassies of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States expressed its concern about the violent clashes in GBAO.

In July, the European Parliament condemned the intimidation and harassment of journalists and human rights defenders in Tajikistan, including those

working on GBAO, and called on the Tajik authorities to set up an effective and independent investigation into the violent clashes in GBAO.

[In September](#), the acting UN high commissioner for human rights mentioned the crisis in GBAO, raising concern over harassment of human rights defenders and journalists, some of whom are facing up to 25 years or life term prison sentences for their activism.