

UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on*
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: TAJIKISTAN

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USCIRF's Mission

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

Introduction

Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's authoritarian government regularly commits particularly severe violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), restricting nearly all aspects of religious life to mute nonstate religious influences and strengthen its control over the country. Rahmon's government has crafted and continues to refine a particular interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam, often invoking the support of state-appointed religious leaders and institutions to legitimize its religious policies and FoRB violations. At times, those who deviate from the state-sanctioned version of Islam have faced detainment, fines, and prison sentences—and, in some cases, individuals have died under suspicious circumstances in state custody, showing evidence of physical abuse or medical neglect.

This report outlines concerning religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan, including examining the government's ongoing efforts to control all aspects of Tajik religious life.

Legal Framework Regulating Religion

In power since 1992, President Rahmon has maintained leadership of Tajikistan by repressing those who threaten his position, including political opposition, independent media, and human rights organizations. He is reportedly planning to eventually transfer the presidency to his son, Rustam, but in the meantime he faces serious domestic challenges such as poverty, social unrest, and complicated bilateral relationships with neighboring states.

In response to these potential sources of instability, Rahmon's government continues to suppress fundamental freedoms, including its ongoing restrictions on FoRB through several key laws. The 2009 On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations law, commonly referred to as the religion law, mandates that religious groups register with the state through a vague and often onerous process to operate legally. The process requires personal information about all members of the applicant group. Even after a prospective group provides all such information required to register, the law empowers authorities to reject its application for a range of reasons. Once registered, religious groups still face significant restrictions on their activities. For example, they must receive state approval to conduct religious activities outside of registered places of worship, which are often under government surveillance. They are also required to obtain official approval on all religious materials following examination by state "religious experts."

www.USCIRF.gov
@USCIRF
Media@USCIRF.gov

732 N. Capitol Street, NW, Suite #A714
Washington, DC 20401
202-523-3240



The religion law also regulates religious education by, among other items, requiring those who seek to study religion abroad to first obtain approval from the Tajik government—but without detailing how to obtain that approval. Domestic opportunities for religious education also remain limited, as the only institution where Muslims can receive higher religious education is the state-run Islamic Institute. In addition, the religion law requires that minors receive approval from parents or guardians to engage in any religious activities; however, the law On Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children, also known as the parental responsibility law, altogether prohibits children from participating in religious activities.

The law On Resistance to Extremism, commonly referred to as the extremism law, further regulates religion by empowering government officials to penalize a wide range of activities under the guise of combating "extremism." Under the law, extremist activities do not clearly require violence or the incitement of violence; instead, they remain vague and broadly defined, such as "inciting religious hatred" and "promoting the superiority of citizens based on their religion." The religion law similarly includes blasphemy provisions that ban "insulting religious feelings" and "promoting religious superiority." Further, the Ministry of Justice maintains a list of banned extremist organizations that includes religious groups, ideologies, and political organizations that have no known history of violence.

The law On the Regulation of Traditions and Ceremonies, also known as the traditions law, restricts a wide range of religious holidays, celebrations, and rituals—particularly those that are important to Muslims. For example, the law regulates the observance of Ramadan, birthdays, circumcisions, baby naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. In 2024, the government amended the law to ban clothes that it deems "foreign to national culture," justifying such restrictions as a means to "protect the core values of national culture" and "prevent wasteful spending." In practice, authorities have interpreted this ban to apply to all religious head coverings besides headscarves tied behind the neck.

Quasi-Independent Islamic Regulatory Institutions

Tajikistan's religion law maintains certain provisions that specifically regulate the activities of Muslims, such as granting the government the right to intervene in the selection of Islamic leaders. This intervention contravenes the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)—to which Tajikistan is a signatory—as well as the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief states, which includes the right of religious communities to appoint their own religious leaders.

The Tajik government has in recent years carefully crafted a particular interpretation of Sunni Islam that it views as amenable to its policy ambitions, affording a "special role" to the Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence. To support this narrow interpretation, the government employs the support of quasi-independent Islamic religious institutions, such as the Islamic Center, which houses the Council of Ulema and regulates the practice of Sunni Islam.

The Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) works closely with the Islamic Center; the country's state-appointed grand mufti, currently Saidmukarram Abdulqodirzoda, who also serves as the chairman of both the Islamic Center and the Council of Ulema. By law, the Islamic Center serves as the chief religious center for all Sunni Muslims in Tajikistan and oversees all Islamic institutions.

Both the Islamic Center and the Council of Ulema serve to legitimize and enforce state control over Islamic thought and practice in Tajikistan. For example, the Islamic Center disseminates CRA-provided sermon topics to imams for use during Friday prayers in local mosques. It has also used Friday prayers to support official policies, such as stricter punishments for bans on religious groups. For its part, the Council of Ulema is responsible for issuing religious fatwas, which often explicitly support official policies such as the recent ban on "alien" clothing.

FoRB Prisoners

USCIRF includes in the Frank R. Wolf FoRB Victims List 14 individuals whom Tajik authorities have imprisoned or detained on spurious extremism charges for practicing Islam independently from the state. Some of the peaceful religious activities of these victims and others, which the government deemed criminal, have included teaching religion in a private setting, providing or attending unauthorized sermons, and allowing minors to attend mosques. At least one individual, *Shohida Mamadjonova*, has been in prison since 2022 in retaliation for the religious freedom advocacy of a relative who lives abroad.

The Tajik government has imprisoned on vague extremism charges many of the FoRB victims whose cases USCIRF monitors for their alleged affiliation with banned organizations or movements. For example, it frames Salafi Islam as a single, "extremist" organization despite the fact it represents an expansive ideology that broadly claims to advocate a lifestyle according to the earliest community of Muslims. A case in point is *Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov*, an individual's case that USCIRF monitors, whom authorities have imprisoned since 2021 for alleged Salafi affiliation and privately teaching Islam.

Recent incidents of FoRB prisoners dying in custody have also shed light on the severity of Tajikistan's abysmal record on religious freedom. For example, in October 2025, Saidazam Rahmonov, a Tajik citizen and resident of Germany, died under suspicious circumstances while in detention after returning to Tajikistan to collect documents necessary to apply for German citizenship. Tajik security forces arrested him and claimed that he was planning a terrorist attack—but their suspicions reportedly came from his traditional beard and the contents of his phone, including religious videos and photos of his wife wearing a hijab, rather than from any actual evidence of a violent plot. Less than a week later, Tajik authorities returned Rahmonov's body to his family, claiming that he had committed suicide despite his body showing signs of torture, including a broken leg and marks from what was likely electric shock.

Along with other groups that claim an Islamic identity, the Tajikistan government has for over a decade banned the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a political group that has advocated for FoRB rights, labeling it extremist and detaining members of its leadership. The IRPT has been a part of Tajik politics since the fall of the former Soviet Union, at various points holding seats in Parliament, serving as a popular social movement, and advocating for respecting Tajikistan's secular constitution and international religious freedom commitments.

Targeting of Communities in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO)

The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) is isolated from the rest of Tajikistan by the Pamir Mountains. The government has attempted to increase its control over GBAO and its residents since the end of the country's 1992–1997 civil war, when the opposition largely maintained control over the region. As part of this tightening control, authorities have continued to restrict and penalize the religious activities and expression of Pamiri Ismaili Shi'a Muslims and other ethnic minorities in the region, such as the Yazgolumi people, who largely practice Sunni Islam.

Since a violent crackdown on protests in 2022, the Tajik government has systematically limited nearly all aspects of cultural and religious life for ethnically Pamiri Ismaili Shi'a Muslims in GBAO. At that time, authorities extrajudicially killed Pamiri leaders while surveilling, harassing, detaining, and imprisoning other members of the community en masse, sometimes for their peaceful religious activities. The government has also targeted those who belong to the Yazgolumi linguistic minority of GBAO, including by penalizing their religious expression of Sunni Islam. Experts believe that the government's targeting of the community is partly in retribution for its involvement in the civil war, when some of its

people supported the opposition by providing secure lines of communication in their isolated language. Most Yazgolumi individuals whom authorities have targeted live in Dushanbe.

Targeting of Jehovah's Witnesses

Tajik Jehovah's Witnesses have long feared severe punishment for their peaceful religious activities, as authorities dissolved the group's largest congregation in 2007, prevented its registration since, and outlawed its activities as extremist in 2021. The human impact of this ongoing crackdown is perhaps best evident in the tragic case of Jehovah's Witness and former FoRB victim *Shamil Khakimov*. Following his release in 2023, he was serving a three-year ban on engaging in religious activities; he died before the expiration of that ban, thus depriving him of any last opportunities to share in worship and other religious traditions with his community.

Enforcement of the Traditions Law

The Tajik government has enforced the traditions law through administrative penalties and informational campaigns. Officials from the Department of Women and Family Affairs, sometimes in collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the CRA, have conducted informational campaigns across the country to dissuade women and girls from wearing "foreign" clothing. In February 2026, officials visited schools throughout Fayzobod district to hold discussions on topics that included "the imitation of foreign culture"—a likely reference to the same issue of women's headscarf styles and other issues under the traditions law.

In addition to this ongoing effort to control women's religious identity through clothing, authorities have also exploited the traditions law to restrict access to the Hajj—the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, which nearly all Islamic traditions encourage Muslims who are able to perform at least once in their lives. Officials consistently urge Tajiks to spend their money on public projects instead of on Hajj travel. Meanwhile, the CRA blatantly requires anyone performing the Hajj to pay for related arrangements through Orienbank—a company that President Rahmon's brother-in-law runs. In addition, the chairman of the Civil Service Agency, Ilyas Idriszoda, has also advised government officials to wait until after retirement to perform the Hajj, which some employees have interpreted as a threat to their employment.

Restrictions on Folk Practices

President Rahmon's control over religion extends to non-scriptural folk practices, especially when the individuals who engage in such activities are typically well respected and influential within their communities—and thus representing potential rivals for state authority. The Tajik word for "magic," *chodu*, is a broad term that authorities regularly apply to arbitrarily penalize a wide range of folk practices that are often tied to Islamic tradition and hold deep cultural importance in Tajik society. It is common practice for Tajiks to seek the services of a broad range of these practitioners, such as female religious specialists known as *bibi otin* or *otincha*. These practitioners have led women-only religious gatherings in Tajikistan, as a 2004 fatwa from the Council of Ulema forbids Sunni Muslim women from praying in mosques, forcing them to find alternative fora for religious gatherings. These specialists lead women-only activities, including reciting prayers and devotional poetry; they also teach basic Islamic principles to women and children and perform life-cycle rituals for mourning those who have died, for healing the sick, and for protecting newborn babies. A *qasida khon*, or a religious singer, is another type of folk practitioner who musically recites devotional poems in praise of figures from Islamic history and tradition.

These sorts of folk and community roles have faced increasing challenges from the Tajik government, which amended the Administrative Code in June 2024 to penalize those who engage in such deeply rooted cultural traditions under Article 482 and subject them to up to 15 days of administrative detention or a fine. That same year, authorities amended the Criminal Code to include Article 240.1, which penalizes those who engage in such practices multiple times within a year, even after receiving an administrative penalty. The punishment for criminal violators is a fine or imprisonment between one and two years. In July 2025, an additional provision of the Administrative Code, Article 482.1, required authorities to fine individuals who use such services."

At times, Tajik officials have publicly highlighted cases of individuals whom police have arrested on such charges, circulating photos of the accused and the materials they allegedly used in their practices (e.g., herbs, water, and candles). However, the government only releases such information on a small number of cases and with minimal details. This lack of transparency makes it exceedingly difficult to ascertain these individuals' actual activities that led to their arrests, contributing to



concerns that the government's crackdown continues to extend to a broad range of peaceful folk practices.

Conclusion

President Rahmon and his regime continue to exert every effort to tightly control the religious space in Tajikistan as part of their broader efforts to maintain political hegemony over the country. The legal and institutional framework regulating religion most directly impacts the largest religious group in the country, Sunni Muslims, as officials often penalize those who deviate from the state's preferred interpretation of Islam. However, restrictions on religious practices likewise extend to other Muslim and non-Muslim minority groups. The government's heavy-handed enforcement of regulating religion often includes egregious and ongoing FoRB violations, such as long prison sentences, physical abuse, medical neglect, and, at times, extrajudicial killings.

Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino
Policy Analyst

Gretchen Birkle
Senior Advisor

Susan Bishai
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum
Policy Analyst

Guillermo Cantor
Director of Research and Policy

Serena Doan
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kaylee Fisher
Public Affairs Specialist

Andrew Hamm
Victims List Database Specialist

Sema Hasan
Senior Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer
Chief Administrative Officer

Kirsten Lavery
Supervisory Policy Analyst and International Legal Specialist

Veronica McCarthy
Government Affairs Specialist

Hilary Miller
Policy Analyst

Nora Morton
Operations Specialist

Molly Naylor-Komyatte
Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre
Policy Analyst

Katherine Todd
Policy Analyst

Ross Tokola
Policy Analyst

Brett Warner
Administrative Specialist

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Nathan Wineinger
Chief of Public Affairs

Jean Wu
Policy Analyst

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