TAJIKISTAN 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right, individually or jointly with others, to adhere to any religion or to no religion and to participate in religious customs and ceremonies. The constitution states, "Religious associations shall be separate from the state and shall not interfere in state affairs." The law restricts Islamic prayer to specific locations, regulates the registration and location of mosques, and prohibits persons younger than 18 from participating in public religious activities. The government's Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) maintains a broad mandate that includes approving registration of religious associations, construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature. The government maintains a list of banned extremist organizations.

Law enforcement agencies continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in, or of supporting, prohibited groups. The government arrested 195 suspected members of "extremist" and "terrorist" organizations in the first half of 2023. Authorities continued a crackdown on Ismaili followers of the Aga Khan in the Gorno-Badakhshon Autonomous Region (GBAO), populated by the ethnically and religiously distinct Pamiri minority. Authorities reportedly seized several properties associated with the Aga Khan. On May 16, Jehovah's Witnesses member Shamil Khakimov, imprisoned since 2019, was released from prison after serving a four-and-a-half-year sentence. Khakimov's health condition seriously deteriorated during his incarceration. On April 11, the Khatlon Regional Court sentenced

imam Abduhannon Usmonov to six years' imprisonment "for public calls to extremist activities" and "obstructing basic compulsory education." In March, a district court in Dushanbe sentenced Muhammadi Rahmatullo, one of the "former leaders of the Salafis of Tajikistan," banned in the country, to eight years in prison. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that Farzona Sidikova and Takhmina Avlekulova were arrested and fined while peacefully sharing their personal religious beliefs. On June 14, the Supreme Court ruled that the *Pamir Daily News* – an independent news site focusing on the GBAO region where Ismaili Shia adherents are a majority of the population – was an "extremist organization" and its activities were banned in Tajikistan. Norwegian human rights NGO Forum 18 reported that a 2021 secret decision of the Supreme Court declared Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist organization and banned its activities throughout the country, upholding an earlier ban in 2007. Jehovah's Witness appeals of the government ban and attempts to register were again rejected.

The government continued to select all Friday sermon topics for imams and khatibs. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce an Ulema Council edict that prohibited women from praying at mosques. There were reports that authorities used mosque closures to pressure young men to register for the draft. Authorities continued to monitor all literature of a religious nature and banned many books and other media throughout the year. The government continued to try to force students studying Islam abroad without government approval to return home and reported that 718 students had thus far been forced to return. Information on the exact time period over which they were returned was not provided in the government disclosure.

The government also arrested and fined people for teaching Islam to family members at home without a government license to do so. UN Special

Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Nazila Ghanea visited the country in April and released a statement urging authorities to adapt and reshape its laws on freedom of religion or belief and "to look beyond the singular concern with extremism, terrorism, and incitement and to open imaginations to positive contributions of religion to a harmonious and rich public life."

Individuals outside government continued to express reluctance to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or discrimination based on religious belief, due to fear of government harassment. According to members of religious minority groups, Muslims who converted to non-Muslim religions usually faced social disapproval from family and relatives. On social media, there was significant criticism of Ismaili Shia Muslims and Zoroastrians. Traditional state and private media reportedly did not negatively portray or target minority religious groups.

In meetings throughout the year with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to raise concerns regarding restrictions on minors' and women's participation in religious services, the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country, and restrictions on the religious education of youth. Embassy representatives raised the registration difficulties faced by non-Islamic religious organizations, the provisions in the freedom of conscience law, and the requirements for religious organizations to report certain activities to the government. Embassy officers again sought amnesty for prisoners of conscience, including the release of Shamil Khakimov. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with civil society, NGO representatives, and religious leaders during the year.

The country has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated Tajikistan as a CPC and announced a waiver of the required sanctions that accompany designation in the “important national interest of the United States.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.2 million (midyear 2023). The government estimates the population to be higher, at just more than 10.1 million. According to local academics, the country is more than 90 percent Muslim, of whom the majority adhere to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Approximately 3 to 4 percent of Muslims are Ismaili Shia, a majority of whom reside in the GBAO region, located in the eastern part of the country.

The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox. There are smaller communities of evangelical Christians, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Lutherans, and nondenominational Protestants. There also are smaller communities of Jews, Baha’is, and members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country a secular state and that "religious associations shall be separate from the state and shall not interfere in state affairs." The constitution provides that everyone has the right individually or jointly with others to profess any religion or no religion and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies. Since 2007, the government has banned Jehovah's Witnesses for carrying out religious activities contrary to the country's laws, such as refusing obligatory military service. A 2021 decision of the Supreme Court declared Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist organization and upheld the 2007 ban on its activities throughout the country.

The law prohibits the establishment and activities of religious associations promoting racism, nationalism, enmity, social and religious hatred, calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order, or the organization of armed groups. The constitution prohibits "propaganda and agitation" that encourage religious enmity. In accordance with provisions of the constitution, no ideology of a political party, public or religious association, movement, or group may be recognized as a state ideology.

The law prohibits provoking religiously based hatred, enmity, or conflict as well as humiliating and harming the religious sentiments of other citizens. The law defines extremism as the activities of individuals and organizations aimed at destabilization, subverting the constitutional order, or seizing power. This definition includes inciting religious hatred. In the case of noncriminal incitement of "social, racial, national, regional, or religious (confessional) hatred," the code of administrative violations provides for five to 10 days' administrative detention or a fine of 50 to 100 "fee units" (the value of which the government sets each year), equal to 3,400 – 6,800 somoni ($300 to $600). The criminal code stipulates two to 12 years'

imprisonment for a crime committed on the same basis, depending on the specifics of the case.

The law prohibits individuals from joining or participating in what it considers to be extremist organizations. The government maintains a list of "extremist organizations" that it says employ terrorist tactics in an effort to advance Islamist political goals, including the National Alliance of Tajikistan, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Qa'ida, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, Jamaat Tabligh, Islamic Group (Islamic Community of Pakistan), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Party of Turkestan (former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Tojikistoni Ozod, Sozmoni Tablighot, Jamaat Ansarullah, the political opposition movement Group 24, the GBAO-focused independent news site *Pamir Daily News*, and the Salafist movement broadly.

The CRA is the government body primarily responsible for overseeing and implementing all provisions of the law pertaining to religion. The Center for Islamic Studies, under the Executive Office of the President, helps formulate the government's policy toward religion.

The law defines a religious association as a voluntary association of followers of one faith, with the purpose of holding joint worship and celebration of religious ceremonies, religious education, and spreading religious beliefs. To register a religious association, a group of at least 10 persons older than 18 must obtain a certificate from local authorities confirming the adherents of their religious faith have lived in a particular local area for five years. The group must then submit to the CRA proof of the Tajik citizenship of its founders, along with their home addresses and dates of birth. The group must provide an account of its beliefs and religious

practices and describe its attitudes related to education, family, and marriage. The group must specify in its charter the activities it plans to undertake, register as a religious association, and report annually on its activities or face deregistration. According to the CRA, there are 4,058 religious associations registered in the country, 66 of which are non-Muslim, including the Russian Orthodox Church and the Baha'i Faith. This number is unchanged from 2021.

The government subdivides associations formed for "conducting joint religious worship" into religious organizations and religious communities, which also are defined by law. To operate legally, both are required to register with the government, a process overseen by the CRA.

According to the law, a religious organization may provide religious education and spread religious faith. Types of religious organizations include the Islamic Center of Tajikistan (the government-supported body that oversees religious institutions belonging to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, established in law as the Republican Religious Center), central Friday mosques, central prayer houses, religious education entities, churches, and synagogues. Religious organizations are legal entities whose activities are governed by charters to which they must strictly adhere. They may be district, municipal, or national organizations.

According to the law, a religious community, unlike a religious organization, is not a legal entity. Its members may gather to conduct other religious activities, which are not defined by law. For example, individuals may gather for joint prayer, attend funeral prayers, and celebrate religious holidays. Types of religious communities include Friday mosques, daily five-time prayer mosques, prayer houses, and other places of worship. After

registering with the CRA, a religious community must function based on its charter, which determines the nature and scope of its activities.

The law prescribes penalties for religious associations that engage in activities contrary to the purposes and objectives set out in their charters, and it assigns the CRA responsibility for issuing fines for such activities. The law imposes fines for carrying out religious activities without state registration or reregistration; violating provisions on organizing and conducting religious activities; performing prayers, religious rites, and ceremonies in undesignated places; and performing activities beyond the purposes and objectives defined by the charter of the religious association. For first-time offenses, the government fines individuals 1,020 to 1,360 somoni ($93 to $120), heads of religious associations 2,720 to 4,080 somoni ($250 to $370), and registered religious associations, as legal entities, 13,600 to 27,200 somoni ($1,200 to $2,400). For repeat offenses within one year of an initial fine, penalties are increased to 2,720 to 4,080 somoni ($250 to $370) for individuals, 6,800 to 8,160 somoni ($600 to $750) for heads of religious associations, and 34,000 to 40,800 somoni ($3,100 to $3,700) for registered religious associations. If a religious association conducts activities without registering, local authorities may impose additional fines or close a place of worship.

The law allows restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion deemed necessary by the government to ensure the rights and freedoms of others, public order, protection of the foundations of constitutional order, security of the state, defense of the country, public morals, public health, and the territorial integrity of the country. In addition, religious organizations must report general information about their worship as well as their organizational, educational, and outreach activities to the state annually.

The freedom of conscience law stipulates that no party, public or religious association, movement, or group may be recognized as representing state ideology. The law also asserts that the state maintains control over religious education to prevent illegal training, propaganda, and the dissemination of extremist ideas, religious hatred, and hostility.

The same law broadly empowers the CRA to create regulations to implement state policies on religion, such as establishing specific guidelines for the performance of religious ceremonies. In addition to approving the registration of religious associations, organizations, and communities, the CRA maintains a broad mandate that includes approving the construction of houses of worship, the participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature.

The law requires men to serve one year in the armed forces if they have a university degree and two years if they have not graduated from a university. Men who want to fulfill their service commitment without serving the full one or two years on active duty may pay a fee and complete a one-month reserve training course, though there is a cap on the number of individuals who may utilize this exception. The law does not contain a provision for alternate nonmilitary service.

The CRA oversees activities of religious associations, such as the performance of religious rites, and the development and adoption of legal acts aimed at the implementation of a state policy on the freedom of conscience and religious associations. Religious associations must submit information on sources of income, property lists, expenditures, numbers of employees, wages and taxes paid, and other information upon request by the CRA.

The freedom of conscience law recognizes the special status of Sunni Islam's Hanafi school of jurisprudence with respect to the country's culture and spiritual life. This status, however, does not have any specific legal bearing.

The law restricts Islamic prayer to four locations: mosques, cemeteries, homes, and shrines. It regulates the registration, size, and location of mosques, limiting the number of mosques that may be registered within a given population area. Outside the capital, the government allows "Friday mosques," which conduct larger Friday prayers as well as prayers five times per day, to be located in districts with populations of 10,000 to 20,000 persons; it allows "five-time prayer mosques," which conduct only daily prayers five times per day, in areas with populations of 100 to 1,000. In the capital Dushanbe, authorities allow Friday mosques in areas with 30,000 to 50,000 persons, and five-time prayer mosques in areas with populations of 1,000 to 5,000. The law allows one "central Friday Mosque" per district or city and makes other mosques subordinate to it.

Mosques function according to their charters in buildings constructed by government-approved religious organizations, by individual citizens, or with the assistance of the general population. The law states the selection of chief-khatibs (government-sanctioned prayer leaders at a central Friday mosque), imam-khatibs (government-sanctioned prayer leaders in a Friday mosque, who deliver a sermon at Friday noon prayers), and imams (government-sanctioned prayer leaders in five-time prayer mosques) shall take place in coordination with "the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs," namely the CRA. Local authorities decide on land allocation for the construction of mosques in coordination with "the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs." The CRA disseminates the government-approved topic for each Friday sermon, accompanied by recommended talking points drafted by the Islamic Center. Individual

imam-khatibs may modify or supplement the talking points, and, according to the CRA, there is no penalty for noncompliance.

The law on traditions and celebrations regulates private celebrations, including weddings, funeral services, and observations of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday; sets limits on the number of guests for these events and governs ceremonial gift presentations and other rituals, with the goal of preventing what the government considers exorbitant expenditures on such events. It also bans the traditional sacrifice of animals at ceremonies marking the seventh and 40th day after a death. Traditional sacrifices are permissible during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha. Separately, the freedom of conscience law states that group worship, religious traditions, and ceremonies must be carried out according to the government-approved procedures for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and peaceful processions. The law on traditions and celebrations gives the government authority to impose further restrictions on celebrations and ceremonies in the case of emergencies, including medical emergencies.

According to the law on traditions and celebrations, "Individuals and legal entities are obliged to protect the values of the national culture, including the state language and national dress." According to customary (i.e., not official) interpretation, "national dress" does not include the hijab, although it does include a traditional Tajik form of woman's head covering known as a *ruymol*. The code of administrative violations does not list the wearing of a beard, hijab, or other religious clothing as violations.

The freedom of conscience law allows registered religious organizations to produce, export, import, sell, and distribute religious literature and other materials containing religious content after receiving CRA approval. Only registered religious associations and organizations are entitled to establish

enterprises that produce literature and material with religious content. Such literature and material must indicate the full name of the religious organization producing it. The code of administrative violations allows government authorities to levy fines for the production, export, import, sale, or distribution of religious literature without CRA permission. According to the code, violators are subject to confiscation of such literature, as well as fines of 4,080 to 4,760 somoni ($370 to $440) for individuals, 11,560 to 12,240 somoni ($1,000 to $1,100) for government officials, and 40,800 to 47,600 somoni ($3,700 to $4,400) for legal entities, a category that includes all organizations, religious or otherwise. For repeat offenses within one year of an initial fine, violators are subject to confiscation of such literature, as well as fines of 6,120 to 6,800 somoni ($560 to $620) for individuals, 12,240 to 12,920 somoni ($1,100 to $1,200) for government officials, and 54,400 to 68,000 somoni ($4,900 to $6,200) for nongovernment organizations. Under the code, producing literature or material containing religious content without identifying the name of the religious organization producing it entails fines of 40,800 to 54,400 somoni ($3,700 to $5,000) and confiscation of the material; establishing an enterprise to produce religious literature or material for religious purposes, other than those established by registered religious associations, entails a fine of 54,400 to 68,000 somoni ($5,000 to $6,200).

Under the freedom of conscience law, any person guilty of crimes “against sexual integrity,” terrorism, extremism, or other undefined “grave crimes,” cannot be the founder or a member of a religious association or appointed as an imam-khatib.

The parental responsibility law prohibits individuals younger than 18 from participating in “public religious activities,” including attending worship services at public places of worship. Individuals younger than 18 may attend

religious funerals and practice religion at home under parental guidance. The statute allows individuals younger than 18 to participate in religious activities that are part of specific educational programs in authorized religious institutions.

The law on parental responsibility allows minors between the ages of seven and 18, with written parental consent, to obtain religious instruction provided by a registered religious organization outside mandatory school hours. According to the law, this may not duplicate religious instruction that is already part of a school curriculum; as part of high school curriculum, students must take general classes on the history of religions.

According to the CRA, parents may teach religion to their children at home, provided they express a desire to learn. While the freedom of conscience law allows parents to provide religious education to their children, it forbids religious associations from preaching or engaging in educational activity in private homes. The same law also restricts citizens from going abroad for religious education or from establishing ties with religious organizations abroad without CRA consent. To be eligible to study religion abroad, students must complete a degree in religious studies domestically and receive written consent from the CRA. The code of administrative violations stipulates fines for violating restrictions on studying religion abroad of 5,440 to 8,840 somoni ($500 to $800) for individuals, 8,160 to 10,200 somoni ($700 to $900) for employees and heads of religious associations or government officials, and 40,800 to 54,400 somoni ($3,700 to $5,000) for legal entities.

While the Ministry of Education sets classroom and curriculum standards and issues licenses for religious organizations, the CRA is responsible for monitoring the organizations to ensure implementation of the law's other

provisions. Central district mosques may operate madrassahs, which are open only to high school graduates, but currently no madrassahs operate in the country because in practice, no madrassah has been able to meet the Ministry of Education's requirements relative to classrooms, qualified teachers, and curriculum. Other mosques, if registered with and licensed by the government, may provide part-time religious instruction for younger students in accordance with their charters.

The law criminalizes providing "unapproved religious education," including online, even if the educational material does not contain content deemed to be religiously extremist. The code of administrative violations stipulates fines of 6,120 to 10,200 somoni ($560 to $900) for individuals, 10,880 to 11,560 somoni ($1,000 to $1,100) for employees and heads of religious associations, and 47,600 to 61,200 somoni ($4,300 to $5,600) for legal entities. The code also imposes a fine of 3,400 to 6,120 somoni ($300 to $560) on those receiving unapproved religious education.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Law enforcement agencies continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in, or of supporting, groups banned by the government, including groups that advocated Islamic political goals and presented themselves as political opponents of the government. At an August 11 press conference, Minister of Internal Affairs Ramazon Rahimzoda announced 195 arrests of suspected members of "extremist" and "terrorist"

organizations in the first half of 2023, 66 fewer than in the same period of 2022. Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize incidents as being solely based on religion.

Forum 18 reported that there were at least 19 known prisoners of conscience in the country imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief as of December 2023.

During the year, some individual social media users ascribed religious motivation to the protests and subsequent government crackdown that occurred from November 2021 to May 2022 in GBAO, where a majority of the ethnic Pamiri residents are adherents of the Shia Ismaili faith and consider the Aga Khan a spiritual leader. NGOs, analysts, and observers assessed the government crackdown as intended to stamp out political opposition and consolidate control over a restive region.

A July 5 *Eurasianet* report detailed several actions authorities reportedly took to pressure Aga Khan-related humanitarian and development entities associated with the Ismaili community and active in GBAO. Authorities reportedly revoked the license of the Aga Khan Lyceum in Khorugh and restructured it into a state-owned lyceum for gifted children. On October 14, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Tajiki-language affiliate *Radio Ozodi* reported that several additional properties belonging to the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) were nationalized, including a plot of land where the University of Central Asia is situated; the Serena Khorugh Inn; and the Khorugh city park.

According to a February 21 post by Forum 18, the teaching of an AKDN-developed course on ethics and knowledge continued in GBAO after February 2021, when authorities “temporarily” ordered the suspension of this course

throughout the region. Regional authorities said they based the suspension on the principle that public school curricula should be broadly secular and not focused on any particular religious group; the growing number of non-Ismaili children in the region's schools, especially in Khorugh; the lack of school hours and classrooms; and "other religious problems in the world today." Teaching of the course outside the school curriculum was done with verbal permission only, not written permission, exiled journalist Anora Sarkorova told Forum 18. According to Sarkorova, in late January authorities halted teaching of the "ethics and knowledge" course in GBAO, and State Committee for National Security officers began seizing copies of the Ethics and Knowledge textbook. The State Committee for National Security demanded others who had copies of the book hand them in, Sarkorova said.

According to Forum 18, local officials fined at least two Ismaili Muslims during the year for hosting Ismaili prayer meetings in their homes. Local officials fined a homeowner in Roshtqala District in January and a second in Rushon District in February; each was fined 600 somoni ($55). The fines were reportedly issued without any court hearing. Ismaili communities in GBAO villages used to meet in larger homes by rotation for weekly prayers on Thursday evenings or in the daytime on Fridays. In some places prayer meetings were held in homes every day, unnamed people from the region told Forum 18. In late 2022, however, Ismaili prayers in homes in GBAO were banned. Following the ban, officials went door to door and warned people against attending home prayer meetings, an anonymous Ismaili told Forum 18. On January 14, officials told village elders at a meeting in Khorugh not to allow prayers in homes and warned that those who took part would be fined; they instructed the elders to pass this message to local inhabitants. The two Ismaili centers in the country – in Khorugh and Dushanbe – remained open, but only for prayers. Forum 18 reported that

officials banned the centers from conducting any educational or cultural activities.

On May 16, a 72-year-old member of Jehovah's Witnesses, Shamil Khakimov, imprisoned in 2019 for "inciting religious hatred" after police found Jehovah's Witnesses literature and a Tajiki-language Bible in his home, was released from prison after serving a four-and-a-half-year sentence. Khakimov's health seriously deteriorated during his incarceration as he completely lost sight in his right eye, developed gangrene, underwent two surgeries on his left leg, and suffered from high blood pressure and heart disease, according to his lawyer. Court and prison authorities denied numerous requests from the Jehovah's Witness community to obtain early release or outside medical treatment for Khakimov's serious medical ailments. He was banned from proselytizing for three years after his release from prison, and a prison official verbally warned him "not to teach" about his religion as he was being released.

On April 11, *Radio Ozodi* reported that the Khatlon Regional Court sentenced Abduhannon Usmonov, a 51-year-old imam of a mosque in Kushoniyon district, to six years' imprisonment "for public calls to extremist activities" and "obstructing basic compulsory education." On April 16, Varqa Zayniddin, senior assistant to the Khatlon regional prosecutor told local media that during the investigation and trial it was revealed that Usmonov was an adherent of the banned Salafi movement. The government said Usmonov published and disseminated videos with extremist content on social networks and prevented his minor daughter from receiving compulsory basic education in violation of the country's constitution. Authorities arrested Usmonov in January after he posted a video on social media in which he forbade singing and dancing at his nephew's wedding and

cursed guests, forcing them to disperse. In a video released by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Mannonov said that he repented his behavior.

On March 23, *Radio Ozodi* reported that a district court in Dushanbe sentenced Muhammadi Mukharramov, one of the "former leaders of the Salafis of Tajikistan" who were banned in the country, to eight years in prison. According to his brother, Mukharramov was sentenced under Article 307 of the criminal code, but authorities did not disclose official information. Article 307 requires/sets punishment for public calls for forcefully changing constitutional structure, public calls for extremist activities, public calls for organizing an extremist union or an extremist organization, and for organizing educational groups with extremist content. Forum 18 reported that Mukharramov was convicted for privately teaching Islam in 2022 to a group of 12 Muslim men, whose names were unknown. The court convicted the 12 of "creating an extremist association" and sentenced them to between six- and nine-years' imprisonment. Forum 18 reported that Imam Mukharramov did not have his own attorney but was given a state-appointed lawyer who did not discuss the case with his family, give them the indictment, or provide them a copy of the verdict. Mukharramov did not appeal his sentence. Forum 18 reported that his family hoped he would be granted amnesty in 2024. (He was previously released under an amnesty in 2021 while serving an eight-year sentence for organizing an extremist community.)

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that on June 18, two female members of the group, Farzona Sidikova and Takhmina Avlekulova, were arrested while peacefully sharing their personal religious beliefs. On June 21, Sidikova and Avlekulova were charged under article 462 (1) of the code on administrative violations for "incitement of religious (confessional) enmity or discord" and were each fined the equivalent of $300. On July 19, the appeals court

denied appeals filed by Sidikova and Avlekulova. A Ukrainian attorney, who was willing to represent them, was not allowed to participate, despite legal rules providing for his appearance. Jehovah's Witnesses claimed the appellate court ignored gross legal and procedural violations by the lower court, which were presented in both written and oral arguments, and its decision came into force immediately. While there was a possibility of further appeal to the Supreme Court, the fines had already been enforced. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, these were the first cases initiated against members of Jehovah's Witnesses under that article of the code on administrative violations.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

On June 14, the Supreme Court ruled that the *Pamir Daily News* – an independent news site focusing on the GBAO region where Ismaili Shia adherents are a majority of the population – was an "extremist organization" and its activities were banned in the country. The website was blocked in the country but continued to operate from abroad and was accessible in Tajikistan via its Telegram channel or with a VPN/proxy server.

Jehovah's Witnesses representatives continued to object to the provision in the law regarding compulsory military service, saying that it violated their beliefs because the alternative arrangement available under the statute required participation in the military (through training) or payment of a fee to the Ministry of Defense and did not allow for an exemption based on religious beliefs.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

At the August 1 press conference summarizing the first half of 2023, CRA Chair Davlatzoda publicly confirmed the official registration of 49 central Friday mosques, 327 Friday mosques, 3,612 five-time prayer mosques, 66 non-Islamic religious associations, one Islamic center, and three jamoatkhonas (Ismaili community centers that host both religious and cultural activities) in the country, for a total of 4,058 religious associations. These numbers remained unchanged from 2021, as CRA did not register any new religious associations since then.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to seek registration, an effort they began in 2007. Some members of the community stated authorities harassed them.

A secret decision of the Supreme Court in March 2021 declared Jehovah's Witnesses an extremist organization and banned its activities throughout the country, upholding an earlier ban in 2007, according to a report from Forum 18 published on September 22. The report noted that the case leading to the Supreme Court decision was initiated by the Prosecutor General's Office. According to Forum 18, the Jehovah's Witnesses community found out about the hearing and upheld ban only when the government referred to it in response to the UN Human Rights Committee in April 2022. The Supreme Court refused to make the text or reasoning of the decision available and, on September 6, told Forum 18 that the process was done in a closed hearing due to its national security implications and that "participation of the organization was not necessary."

According to the Forum 18 report, Jehovah's Witnesses initiated a legal appeal for re-registration, which was rejected by the Military Tribunal of Dushanbe Garrison on April 17. Jehovah's Witnesses did so following the July 2022 view of the UN Human Rights Committee that "none of the reasons put forward by the State party's authorities and courts "for banning

Jehovah's Witnesses and refusing them reregistration are lawful under Tajikistan's legally binding international human rights law obligations. On August 31, the Supreme Court upheld the April decision of the military tribunal. Following a hearing on the same day, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that at the hearing, the court repeatedly referred to the initial reasons from 2007 on why the group's registration was banned, despite Jehovah's Witnesses asking the Supreme Court "to give a legal assessment of the grounds for refusal given by the military court" in its judgment. Instead, the Supreme Court reportedly emphasized that if international acts or decisions contradict national legislation, then the country's law prevails.

On August 1, Russia state media outlet *Sputnik Tajikistan* reported that CRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda denied reports that the government had refused registration to an unspecified "Protestant church." He said that if members of the denomination contacted the CRA, they would receive a written response within the framework of the law. Members of Protestant denominations in Tajikistan said that their registration requests were not officially refused by CRA, but they were unofficially told to drop their requests and had not been allowed to register. A group of expatriate Protestants was also unofficially refused registration and was operating underground at year's end.

On August 1, *Radio Ozodi* reported that Abduqodir Abduqahhor Talbakov, a well-known journalist and former director of the Lohuti public library in Dushanbe, applied to the CRA to register the society of Zoroastrians in the country, but did not receive a certificate from the Dushanbe administration confirming the existence of Zoroastrian followers, although he submitted the necessary documents for registration. He claimed that over 200 followers in Dushanbe are in touch with him, but without municipal recognition, the CRA would not register the society. In a separate August 1

article, *Sputnik Tajikistan* reported that CRA Chair Davlatzoda confirmed that Talbakov had appealed to the CRA for registration of a Zoroastrian religious association, but that the appeal was oral, not in writing; after Talbakov spoke with the CRA's lawyer about the documents required for submission, Talbakov did not submit a written application. According to *Radio Ozodi*, Tolbakov said he has been the target of verbal harassment and threats by private citizens because of his Zoroastrian advocacy.

NGOs reported continued government restrictions on imam-khatibs and imams, such as the central government selection and approval of sermon topics.

Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government supported Ulema Council in 2004 that prohibited women from praying at mosques. Ismaili Shia women were permitted to attend Shia services in GBAO and Dushanbe, however. On June 22, CRA spokesperson Afshin Muqim told *Asia-Plus* that according to existing national legislation, there were no obstacles to women visiting mosques, but that based on the 2004 Ulema Council decision, women were not advised to perform collective prayers in mosques, but to pray at home. Muqim said that the Ulema Council decision referred only to collective prayers, but if a woman visiting a mosque in accordance with rules and religious etiquette, decided to pray in some corner of the mosque, there was no issue with that.

There was no legal prohibition against wearing a hijab or a beard, although there were isolated reports of authorities discouraging "nontraditional or alien" clothing or long beards. On April 28, *Radio Ozodi* reported that during an April 26 meeting with local bloggers, Head of the Committee on Youth and Sports Abdullo Rahmonzoda criticized bearded bloggers, stating that "beard propaganda on social networks threatens national security."

According to Rahmonzoda, authorities perceived men with beards as displaying solidarity with terrorist groups, such as the Taliban, that actively promote beards. As such, having a beard was a political statement that creates a threat to the country's security, he said.

On May 13, *Radio Ozodi* reported that authorities closed the Umari Odil Mosque in Nayman village of Isfara District on May 9, reportedly to pressure parishioners to ensure their conscription-aged sons enlisted in the military. A local resident confirmed the mosque was closed and said that during Friday prayers on May 12, clergy called on mosque-goers to send their sons, most of whom were migrant workers in Russia, to the army. On May 16, *Radio Ozodi* reported that Isfara authorities reopened the mosque, after several villagers promised to send their children to serve in the army. Government authorities did not comment on reasons behind the initial closure of the mosque.

On October 14, *Radio Ozodi* reported that authorities began demolishing a mosque in Arbobi village of Vahdat city. Some residents said the demolition was a result of the village providing insufficient numbers of army recruits. The local CRA rep said the mosque was just being refurbished, not destroyed.

Authorities continued to monitor all literature of a religious nature. CRA Chair Davlatzoda stated at an August 1 press conference that the CRA's Department for Religious Analysis reviewed 220 items submitted for pre-distribution religious examination in the first half of the year, approving 98, denying 122. The approved items included 1,143 pieces of religious literature (94.2 percent of the 1,213 examples of religious literature examined), 2,805 leaflets, 75 CDs, and 6 mobile phones. The CRA denied approval of 70 items of religious literature, 570 leaflets, 107 CDs, and 18

mobile phones. CRA explained its objections to the unapproved materials as "due to the presence of signs of extremism." The report did not provide additional context for the seizure of phones.

On February 3, *Radio Ozodi* reported that bookstores specializing in religious literature near the central mosque of Dushanbe were reopened after being closed since October 2022. The bookstores sold religious books and brochures published with the permission of the Islamic Center of Tajikistan or brought into the country from abroad. According to the report, there was less religious literature available because of the closure. An unnamed seller said the shops were allowed to open, but the amount of religious literature was very limited.

CRA Deputy Chair Abdurahmon Vahhobzoda stated at a February 3 press conference that the illegal import and sale of religious literature, the lack of religious studies expertise, and complaints from book authors about illegal reprinting were the main reasons for the 2022 closure of bookstores specializing in religious literature in Dushanbe.

Authorities continued to require that anyone wishing to study religion abroad receive government approval and do so at a government-approved religious institution. During his August 1 press conference, CRA Chair Davlatzoda stated that approximately 700 students were studying at the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan named after Imam Azam Abu Hanifa.

On September 14, *Asia-Plus* reported that in the first half of the year, authorities in Sughd region repatriated two individuals engaged in religious studies abroad without approval. According to Suhrob Rustamzoda, head of the Sughd regional department on religion, four residents of Sughd region were still engaged in "illegal" religious studies abroad. Rustamzoda noted

that a total of 718 persons who were engaged in unapproved religious studies abroad were forced to return home.

Forum 18 reported that on January 23, the Sangvor District Court fined a local resident 5,760 Somoni ($530) after finding him guilty of "illegal religious teaching." According to the court, the man taught religion to his brother's wife in his home and thus "grossly violated" requirements of the Law on Freedom of Conscience, which stated that providing religious education was only possible with a state license. At the same time, the man was convicted under the Administrative Code for illegally setting up religious teaching.

On March 16, the Department of Internal Affairs press service in Sughd region reported that police arrested Nuriddin Tojiboev for providing "illegal religious education" and promoting ideas of the banned Salafi movement to his students. Law enforcement found "extremist" literature in his residence. Authorities asserted Tojiboev had been a member of the Salafi movement since 2009 and was involved in promoting it until his arrest.

On June 15, the Europe-based and opposition-affiliated *Bomdod* news agency reported the Dusti district court of Khatlon region fined Nozanin Samieva after finding her guilty of illegally teaching the Quran to her neighbor's minor daughter. In a June 10 article in the official newspaper of Khatlon's regional administration, the head of the Dusti District Court, Latofat Jafarzoda, wrote that Samieva illegally taught Islam to an eight-year-old in her home. According to Jafarzoda, Samieva pleaded guilty and confessed that for over two years she taught from religious books. She said she did not know a special permit was necessary to teach Islam and asked the court to grant her leniency, given her sincere repentance and that she had no source of income with two small children in her care. According to

Bomdod, the court fined her only 680 somoni ($62), although providing illegal religious instruction of non-extremist nature normally entailed a fine of 6,120 to 10,200 somoni ($560 to $930) for private individuals.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

In April, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Nazila Ghanea conducted a 10-day official visit to the country. On April 20, she released a statement urging the government to adapt and reshape its laws on freedom of religion or belief, which "would help contribute to development, peace, and understanding" in the country. She underscored respect for freedom of religion should apply to everyone, including women, religious and belief minorities, and children, who should be allowed to enjoy this freedom together with others. Ghanea also urged authorities "to look beyond singular concern with extremism, terrorism, and incitement and to open [their] imaginations to positive contributions of religion to a harmonious and rich public life."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Individuals outside government continued to express reluctance to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or discrimination based on religious belief, due to fear of government harassment. Civil society representatives said discussion of religion in general, especially relations among different religious groups, remained a subject they avoided.

According to members of religious minority groups, Muslims who converted to other religions usually faced social disapproval from family and relatives.

In its *2023 World Watch List*, the NGO Open Doors reported that although government officials targeted Christian communities all over the country, Christian converts from a Muslim background also come under strong pressure from family, friends, and community. Families and communities in rural areas tended to enforce more oppressive measures against Christian converts. Representatives of minority groups stated that, in general, their communities had good relationships with the majority Hanafi Sunni society. On social media, while open hostility toward minority religious groups remained relatively limited, there was significant criticism of Ismaili Shia Muslims and Zoroastrians. Traditional state and private media outlets reportedly did not negatively portray or target minority religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings throughout the year with the Foreign Minister, Deputy Foreign Minister, CRA officials, and other government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to raise concerns regarding restrictions on minors' and women's participation in religious services, the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country, and restrictions on the religious education of youth. Embassy representatives raised the registration difficulties faced by non-Islamic religious organizations, the provisions in the freedom of conscience law, and the requirements for religious organizations to report certain activities to the government.

U.S. officials emphasized with government representatives the importance of ameliorating restrictions on freedom of religion through national legislation, as well as addressing alternatives to military service. U.S. embassy officers again sought amnesty for prisoners of conscience. Prior to his release in May, the embassy advocated the release of Shamil Khakimov as a prisoner of conscience and due to his dire medical situation.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with civil society, NGO representatives, and religious leaders during the year. At the end of Ramadan, the embassy hosted an iftar attended by representatives of various religious communities, civil society, and government officials responsible for policy on religious issues, including representatives of the CRA. Embassy officials engaged in wide-ranging discussions on the state of religious freedom and human rights in the country and the impact of government policies on religion.

Since 2016, the country has been designated a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and issued a waiver of the sanctions as required in the "important national interest of the United States."