

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, the Tajikistani government's record on religious freedom showed little improvement. The regime of President Emomali Rahmon maintained its authoritarian policies, suppressing displays of public religiosity by individuals of all faiths and persecuting minority communities—especially actual and alleged Salafi Muslims, a term authorities apply broadly and indiscriminately. Authorities have banned Salafi Islam since 2009, calling it “extremist”; as a result, the mere performance of Islamic rituals in ways the authorities deem “foreign” or inconsistent with the government’s interpretation of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam is subject to criminal prosecution. As detailed in USCIRF’s [recent issue update](#), Tajikistan has legitimate concerns about violent extremism, but its current policies only exacerbate the problem—such as its extremism law that fails to define the category clearly and often leads to arbitrary detention. Extremist, terrorist, or revolutionary activities are punishable without requiring acts that involve violence or incitement of imminent violence, while trials under these charges lack due process and procedural safeguards. In January, the government [amended](#) legislation that expanded anti-extremism efforts and dramatically increased penalties for managing or funding the activities of unregistered religious organizations as well as for religious communities that establish relations with foreign groups. In a surprising move, the government [reduced](#) the penalty for inciting “religious hatred,” replacing prison sentences of up to five years with an administrative fine or 10 days imprisonment. However, prison overcrowding remains a critical issue, and prisons constitute a major vector of Islamist radicalization. Religious prisoners are singled out for harsh treatment by both authorities and fellow prisoners, while general conditions are inhumane and torture is endemic.

State repression of the country’s Muslim majority persisted as in prior years. Since 2017, authorities have closed more than 2,000 mosques, converting many into cafes, garment factories, and other public facilities. Remaining mosques are frequently outfitted with security cameras that allow government surveillance of attendance and the content of sermons. In January, the government ordered the conversion of a popular mosque in Khujand, the nation’s second-largest city, into a [movie theater](#) due to the region’s relative lack of cinemas. In February, the head of the Department of Women’s and Family Issues [publicly](#) linked hijabs with terrorism and vowed that the government would do everything in its power to “preserve the national culture” and “defend the people” from the threat posed by female religious clothing. The authorities continued to torment former members of the banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) under the guise of a struggle against religious extremism and terrorism, harassing and even imprisoning their [family members](#). In June, one alleged IRPT member was sentenced to 20 years in prison after his [illegal extradition](#) from Austria.

Many religious minorities hide their affiliations for fear of government scrutiny and social backlash, expressing concern over government [plans](#) to document individual religious affiliation in the October 2020 census. Social tolerance for religious minority communities continued to decline. For example, in January a Shi’a Muslim was imprisoned and allegedly [tortured](#) for sharing his faith, an act authorities characterized as spreading “extremist ideas.” Jehovah’s Witnesses have been illegal in Tajikistan since 2008; there are currently two members [imprisoned](#) for their faith, including a 70-year-old man who is serving a five-and-a-half-year sentence.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Tajikistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Condition U.S. assistance to the Tajikistani government, with the exception of aid to improve humanitarian conditions or advance human rights, on 1) reform of the 2009 religion law and the improvement of conditions for freedom of religion or belief, and 2) mandated religious freedom training for Tajikistani officials, including education about the benefits of religious freedom for countering and preventing violent extremism, as part of all U.S. security assistance to Tajikistan;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Tajikistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Press the Tajikistani government at the highest levels to identify and immediately release individuals imprisoned in Tajikistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations; account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; and allow international observers to monitor conditions in Tajikistani prisons.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Promoting Religious Freedom and Countering Violent Extremism in Tajikistan](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)

Background

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and ruled since 1992 by President Rahmon, who has concentrated power in his family's hands. President Rahmon was elected to another seven-year term in October 2020, allegedly winning almost 91 percent of the vote in elections widely [perceived](#) as fraudulent. The government is weak and highly corrupt, and it faces financial catastrophe in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Tajikistan typically derives around 40 percent of its gross domestic product from labor remittances, primarily from Russia, but this dramatically declined as many laborers were forced to return home amid the pandemic. The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim—around 86 percent—while Shi'a Muslims, mostly located in the mountainous east, account for roughly 4 percent. The remaining 10 percent includes Russian Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.

Tajikistan's legal environment for freedom of religion or belief sharply declined after the adoption of several highly restrictive laws in 2009. In particular, the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions set onerous registration requirements; criminalized unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and proselytism; set strict limits on the number and size of mosques; allowed state interference in the appointment of imams and the content of sermons; required official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign coreligionists; and imposed 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. A 2011 law on parental responsibility banned minors from any organized religious activity except funerals. Since 2014, the state has paid imams' salaries and required them to wear state-manufactured religious garments, and the content of sermons is commonly dictated by the government.

Misuse of Extremism Laws

The Tajikistani government continued to use concerns over Islamist extremism to justify actions against participants in certain religious or political activities in 2020. As in past years, Tajikistan used this pretext to crack down on individuals in the religious, media, and civil society sectors. For example, it leads Central Asia in imprisoning journalists for alleged extremism, terrorist links, and inciting religious hatred. In March, the government officially banned the Prague-based news outlet [Akhbor](#), a website founded by a former employee of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to provide objective coverage largely unavailable inside Tajikistan, claiming that it was a "platform" for "extremists and terrorists." [Akhbor](#) was forced to [cease operations in November](#), citing official opposition and the threat it posed to journalists, experts, and participants. In April, a Tajikistani court [sentenced](#) the journalist Daler Sharipov to one year in prison for "inciting religious hatred," likely for his [coverage](#) of religious freedom conditions in the

country, including government anti-hijab campaigns. Government entities make all determinations about extremism through a closed and opaque process that favors the prosecution, and there is no provision for independent analysis.

Government Persecution of Muslims

In 2020, the government conducted [mass arrests](#) and interrogations of Islamic leaders, including prominent Sufi Muslim clerics and many who received religious education abroad. This trend likely represented an attempt by the government to suppress dissent and ensure compliance ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections by intimidating religious leaders who do not follow officially sanctioned Hanafi practice. Furthermore, since January the government has detained at least 154 people it accuses of membership in the banned Muslim Brotherhood; in June, a [Muslim cleric](#) and three of his brothers received suspended prison terms for alleged membership in the group, while 10 other defendants—including the cleric's son, son-in-law, and nephews—were sentenced to prison terms of between five and seven years. In August, a court [sentenced](#) 20 alleged members—including academics, businessmen, and at least one government official—to prison terms that ranged from five to seven years. In November, authorities [arrested](#) Eshoni Sirojiddin, a prominent cleric previously imprisoned for teaching Salafi Islam.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Tajikistan has emphasized security and regional connectivity. In January, then U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells visited Tajikistan and [announced](#) that the United States was "deepening [its] security cooperation in the areas of border security, counterterrorism, law enforcement, and joint military exercises and training." She [referred](#) several times to the more than \$200 million in aid that the U.S. government had provided Tajikistan to secure its border with Afghanistan and expressed concern about restrictions on fundamental freedoms. General Frank McKenzie, commander of [U.S. Central Command](#), made his first visit to Tajikistan in October, where he met with President Rahmon and senior military and security officials to discuss continued cooperation on security and stability in Tajikistan and the Central Asian region, including Afghanistan.

In October, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [launched](#) its first full mission in Tajikistan; its presence in the country had previously been a branch of the regional mission in Kazakhstan. USAID [initiatives](#) in Tajikistan work to foster food security, support civil society and nongovernmental organizations, improve education quality and access, combat human trafficking, and help reintegrate migrant workers into their home communities. The U.S. Department of State has designated Tajikistan as a CPC repeatedly since 2016, [most recently](#) on December 2, but it has also maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the important national interest of the United States."