

TAJKISTAN 2017 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 says religious organizations shall be separate from the state and “shall not interfere in state affairs.” The constitution bans political parties based on religion. The law restricts Islamic prayer to specific locations, regulates the registration and location of mosques, and prohibits persons under 18 from participating in public religious activities. The government’s Committee on Religious Affairs, Regulation of National Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA)’s has a very 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 continued to take measures to prevent individuals from joining or participating in what it considered to be “extremist” organizations, arresting or detaining more than 220 persons, primarily for membership in banned terrorist organizations and religious groups, including ISIS, “Salafis,” and Ansarrullah. Officials continued to prevent members of minority religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, from registering their organizations. Both registered and unregistered religious organizations continued to be subject to police raids, surveillance, and forced closures. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict by the government-supported Council of Ulema prohibiting women from praying at mosques. The government jailed a Protestant pastor in the northern part of the country for “extremism” for possessing “unauthorized” religious literature. Sources stated authorities attempted to “maintain total control of Muslim activity” in the country. The government adopted new laws on national dress that some government entities treated as a ban on hijabs. President Emomali Rahmon called on citizens to stop wearing hijabs and beards, and some municipal authorities continued a pattern of harassing women wearing hijabs and men with beards. Government officials issued statements discouraging women from wearing so-called “nontraditional or alien” clothing, including religious dress.

Citizens generally remained reluctant to discuss societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief, and some individuals who converted from Islam reported they experienced social disapproval. In one case, a student declared she was an atheist on the internet and received largely negative responses and pressure to conform to national “norms” of belief.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy staff met with the government to encourage adherence to its international commitments to respect religious freedom. Embassy officers continued to raise concerns about government restrictions on religious practices, interference with peaceful religious activities, rejection of attempts of minority religions to register their organizations, harassment of those wearing religious attire, and limitations on the publication or importation of religious literature. The embassy also raised the lack of due process in the government's prosecution of individuals on charges of "religious extremism." Embassy officers met with religious leaders and civil society groups to address the same issues and discuss their concerns over government restrictions on the ability of minority religious groups to practice their religious beliefs freely.

Since 2016, Tajikistan has been designated 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. Most recently, on December 22, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.5 million (July 2017 estimate). According to local academics, the population is more than 90 percent Muslim and the majority adheres to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Approximately 4 percent of Muslims are Ismaili Shia, the majority of whom reside in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region located in the eastern part of the country.

Other religious minorities include Christians, a small number of Bahais, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jews. The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox; there are also Baptists, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, and other Protestants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country a secular state and religious associations shall be separate from the state and "shall not interfere in state affairs." According to

the constitution, everyone has the right individually or jointly to adhere to any religion or no religion, and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies.

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.

The law recognizes the “special status” of Sunni Islam’s Hanafi school of jurisprudence with respect to the country’s culture and spiritual life.

The law defines any group of persons who join together for religious purposes as a religious association. Associations formed for the aim of “conducting joint religious worship” are subdivided into religious organizations and religious communities. In order to operate legally, religious associations and organizations are required to register with the government, a process overseen by the CRA.

In order to register a religious organization, a group of at least 10 persons over the age of 18 must first obtain a certificate from local authorities confirming adherents of their religious faith have lived in the local area for at least five years. The group must then submit to the CRA proof of the citizenship of its founders, along with the home address and date of birth of each. The group must also provide an account of its beliefs and religious practices and describe its attitudes related to education, family, and marriage, and provide documentation on the health of its adherents. As part of its submission, a religious group must list its “national religious centers, central cathedral mosques (facilities built for Friday prayers), central *jamoatkhona* (prayer places), religious educational institutions, churches, synagogues, and other forms not contradicting the law.” The group must specify in its charter the activities it plans to undertake, and once registered as a religious organization, must report annually on its activities or face deregistration.

Religious communities include cathedral mosques and mosques where prayers are recited five times per day. These communities are required to register both locally and nationally and must be registered “without the formation of a legal personality.” Religious communities must adhere to the “essence and limits of activity” set out in their charters.

The law provides penalties for religious associations that engage in activities contrary to the purposes and objectives set out in their charter, and assigns responsibility to the CRA for handing down fines for such offenses. The law imposes fines for violating its provisions on organizing and conducting religious activities; providing religious education without permission; 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, individuals are subject to fines of 350 to 500 somoni (\$40 to \$57), heads of religious associations are fined 1,000 to 1,500 somoni (\$114 to \$170), and registered religious associations, as legal entities themselves, are subject to fines of 5,000 to 10,000 somoni (\$570 to \$1,100). For repeated offenses committed within a year of the first offense, fines are increased to 600 to 1,000 somoni (\$69 to \$114) for individuals, 2,000 to 2,500 somoni (\$230 to \$290) for heads of religious associations, and 15,000 to 20,000 somoni (\$1,700 to \$2,300) for the registered religious associations. If a religious association conducts activities without obtaining registration or reregistration, local authorities may force a place of worship to close in addition to levying fines.

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 president's executive office, helps formulate the government's policy toward religion.

The law restricts Islamic prayer to four locations: mosques, cemeteries, homes, and shrines. The law regulates the registration, size, and location of mosques, limiting the number of mosques which may be registered within a given population area. "Friday" mosques, which conduct larger Friday prayers as well as prayers five times per day, are allowed in districts with populations of 10,000 to 20,000 persons; "five-time" mosques, which conduct only daily prayers five times per day, are allowed in areas with populations of 100 to 10,000. In Dushanbe Friday mosques are allowed in areas with 30,000 to 50,000 persons, and five-time mosques are allowed 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 on the basis of their self-designed charters in buildings constructed by government-approved religious organizations or by individual citizens, or with the assistance of the general population. The law states the selection of imam-khatibs (government-sanctioned prayer leaders) and imams shall take place in coordination with "the appropriate state body in charge of religious

affairs” (i.e., the CRA must approve the imam-khatibs and imams elected by the founders of each mosque). The CRA regulates and formulates the content of Friday sermons.

The law regulates private celebrations, including weddings, funeral services, and celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. The law limits the number of guests and controls ceremonial gift presentations and other rituals. The law states mass worship, religious traditions, and ceremonies shall be carried out according to the procedures for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and peaceful processions prescribed elsewhere in the law. An August amendment to the law bans the traditional sacrifice of animals at ceremonies marking the seventh and fortieth day after a death and celebrating the return of Hajj travelers.

On August 23, parliament added an amendment to the law on the regulation of traditions, celebrations, and ceremonies that states, “Individuals and legal entities are obliged to protect the values of the national culture, including the state language, and national dress.” According to customary interpretation, “national dress” does not include the wearing of the hijab. The chairman of the Committee on Women and Family Affairs said in an interview there is no penalty for violation of this amendment, but also stated that a set of regulations would be introduced. The Code of Administrative Violations does not list wearing a beard or the hijab or other religious clothing as violations.

The law allows registered religious organizations to produce, export, import, and distribute an unspecified quantity of religious literature with the advance consent of appropriate state authorities. Only registered religious associations and organizations are entitled to establish enterprises to produce literature and material with religious content. Such literature and material must indicate the full name of the religious organization producing it. The law allows government authorities to levy fines for the production, export, import, sale, or distribution of religious literature without permission from the CRA. According to the law, violators are subject to fines of up to 3,500 somoni (\$400) for individuals; 7,500 somoni (\$860) for government officials (who distribute or produce literature without permission); and 15,000 somoni (\$1,700) for legal entities, a category including organizations of any kind as well as registered religious associations, with confiscation of the religious literature that is the subject of the administrative offense.

The law prohibits children under 18 from participating in “public religious activities,” including attending worship services at public places of worship. Children are allowed to attend religious funerals and to practice religion at home,

under parental guidance. The law allows children to participate in religious activities as part of specific educational programs at authorized religious institutions.

The law requires all institutions or groups wishing to provide religious instruction to obtain permission from the CRA. Central district mosques may operate madrassahs, which are open only to high school graduates. Other mosques, if registered with the government, may provide part-time religious instruction for younger students.

With written parental consent, the law allows minors between the ages of seven and 18 to obtain religious instruction provided by a registered religious organization outside of mandatory school hours. According to the law, this may not duplicate religious instruction already part of the school curriculum. The CRA is responsible for monitoring mosques throughout the country to ensure implementation of these provisions.

According to the CRA, parents may teach religion to their children at home provided the child expresses a desire to learn. The law forbids religious instruction at home to individuals outside the immediate family. The law restricts sending citizens abroad for religious education and establishing ties with religious organizations abroad without CRA consent. To be eligible to study religion abroad, students must complete a higher education degree domestically and be enrolled at a university accredited in the country in which it operates. The law provides for fines of 2,500 to 5,000 somoni (\$290 to \$570) for violating these restrictions.

In December the parliament amended the law on freedom and conscience and religious associations to ban the creation of political parties based on religion. According to the newly amended law, only state educational institutions may provide religious education. The constitution prohibits political parties of “a religious nature” as well as “propaganda and agitation” encouraging religious enmity.

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

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: The government continued to take measures to prevent individuals from joining or participating in what it labeled “extremist”

organizations. The government arrested or detained more than 220 persons on extremism charges, many of whom the government said were “Salafis” and/or ISIS supporters. NGOs stated authorities continued to refuse to register religious groups on technical or administrative grounds. Without registration, groups risked criminal or civil penalties for operating. Jehovah’s Witnesses remained banned and deemed an extremist organization, and the country’s sole Jewish synagogue remained unregistered. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce the edict by the government-supported Council of Ulema prohibiting women from praying at mosques. Human rights activists again stated that authorities sought to “establish total control of Muslim activity” in the country. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) continued to conduct internal video surveillance of mosques in Dushanbe. Authorities remained vigilant against the appearance of “illegal” prayer rooms and mosques around the country. NGOs reported authorities continued to harass women wearing hijabs and men with beards, and continued to conduct raids to shut down shops selling “nontraditional or alien” clothing. Government officials continued to issue statements discouraging women from wearing nontraditional clothing.

Government officials continued to take measures they claimed were intended to prevent individuals from joining or participating in what they considered “extremist” organizations and continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in or supporting such banned groups. Those groups included Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Qaida, Muslim Brotherhood, Taliban, Jamaat Tabligh, Islamic Group (Islamic Community of Pakistan), Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan, Islamic Party of Turkestan (former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – IMU), Lashkar-e-Tayba, Tojikistoni Ozod, Sozmoni Tablighot, Salafi groups, Jamaat Ansarullah, and the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). According to a CRA spokesperson, the committee defined extremism as agitating for the overthrow of the current government or the initiation of sectarian violence.

On July 21, Minister of Internal Affairs Ramazon Rahimzoda told the media that in the first six months of the year, authorities detained 228 individuals suspected of involvement in groups the government deemed terrorist. Included among them were 104 having connections with ISIS, 80 with Salafi groups, 17 with Jamaat Ansarullah, 16 with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and three with the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan. In addition, 13 citizens who joined ISIS voluntarily returned home. All of the voluntary returnees, according to national legislation, were exempt from criminal prosecution.

On November 17, *Asia Plus* reported an imam-khatib of one of the mosques in the northern province of Sughd was in jail for membership in an outlawed Salafi group. A Guliston city court sentenced Ilhomiddin Abdulloyev, imam-khatib of a mosque in the Choruk-Daarron settlement, to 5.5 years in prison on charges of organizing activities of an extremist group. A source at the Guliston city court said Abdulloyev joined the Salafi group while studying in a religious school in Kuwait from 1994 to 1998. According to the news report, Abdulloyev disseminated Salafi literature and urged others to join the group as well. Authorities banned “Salafism” in 2009 as a threat to national security.

According to a November 27 report from the *Ozodagon* news agency, a court in Khujand found cardiovascular surgeon Abdumalik Salomov guilty of membership in an illegal Salafi group and sentenced him to 5.5 years in prison. The court also found two other defendants, Ilhom Gafforov (classmate of Salomov) and Saidullo Mirzoev (friend of Salomov), guilty and sentenced each person to five years in prison.

On October 24, the Khujand city court convicted four men in the Sughd Region – Mumin Sodiqov, Bakhtiyor Ahmadov, Mahmud Fayziyev, and Homid Boymatov – of membership in the banned Salafi religious movement, according to press reports. The court found them guilty on charges of establishment of an extremist organization and participation in a religious organization banned for carrying out extremist activities. Each person received a five-year prison sentence.

In February media reported the arrest of Mullorahmat Okhunov, imam of Hoji Mulloqurbon, a five-time prayer mosque in Mastchoh District, and four of his followers for being members of a Salafi group. According to the CRA, the arrest occurred at the end of January. According to media reports, all five detainees were local residents under the age of 35. The arrest of the imam came after police detained a fellow villager in the town of Buston, where he shared information implicating Okhunov. Later, authorities stated they found materials from banned movements or groups in the house of the imam and the four followers.

On May 23, authorities detained four entrepreneurs from Panjakent and held them in custody for seven days for disobeying the police. Subsequently, the Khujand city court sentenced them to an additional two months of preliminary detention. On June 5-6, the court brought charges against all four for the organization of activities of an extremist organization, accusing the men of membership in a Salafi group. According to media reports, law enforcement officers had previously detained the four individuals in Panjakent in June 2016 on suspicion of

membership in a Salafi group. Media reports stated that according to their relatives, the authorities forced them to shave their beards at that time and released them.

In August the media reported authorities detained Numonkhon Otaev, a former imam-khatib, in the city of Istaravshan for possessing unregistered religious books. According to his relatives, his arrest took place on August 7 after security officers searched his home and confiscated more than 300 religious and other books. News outlets reported Otaev was a well-known scholar and religious leader with no known connections to groups the government considered extremist.

On September 23, media reported local police detained a government-sanctioned imam of a city mosque in Guliston in Sughd Region along with dozens of his followers. Police officers interrogated and released many detainees the same day. The imam-khatib and 10 of his followers remained in custody, however. The authorities did not release the name of the imam-khatib. Authorities accused the imam and his 10 followers of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood.

According to newspaper reports, at the end of July the court of Khujand city sentenced Bahrom Kholmatov – pastor of Sonmin Sonbogim, a Protestant church organization originating in South Korea – to three years’ imprisonment on charges of extremism. Police detained Kholmatov on April 10 in Khujand, and a panel of local religious experts, part of a specialized CRA council to analyze religious literature and provide consent to its importation or publication and distribution in the country, deemed the literature in his house and church to have extremist content. Following the verdict, authorities deregistered the Sonmin Sonbogim church, which meant it could no longer function legally despite having been registered in 2009. Kholmatov’s defense lawyer appealed the court’s decision. In early September media reported the Sughd regional court upheld the July verdict. According to a December update by the NGO Forum 18, Kholmatov decided not to appeal his sentence further.

On October 19, media reported Daniil Islomov, a Jehovah’s Witness from Dushanbe, refused to take the oath, wear a military uniform, or bear arms due to his religious beliefs after being called for military service. The court sentenced him to six months in prison on the charge of evading military service. Islomov appealed his case to the Supreme Court in November. In December Forum 18 stated that the Supreme Court denied Islomov’s appeal despite the court’s recognition that (unspecified) “mistakes” were made in the case.

On June 3, according to representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses, police raided a private home in Khujand, seizing passports, religious books, and a personal computer. Following an interrogation of those present in the house, police returned all of the seized items.

At a January 10 press conference, CRA officials stated the committee's functions were based on the constitution and laws of the country, including laws concerning freedom of conscience and religious organizations, the regulation of traditions, celebrations, and ceremonies, and on parental responsibility in the education and upbringing of children. The officials stated that decrees and orders of the president, government, and internal legal acts ratified by the parliament were additional sources for CRA functions.

Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government-supported Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying at mosques.

NGOs reported authorities put restrictions on imam-khatibs, such as centrally selecting and approving sermon topics, as well as prohibiting some imam-khatibs from performing certain ceremonies. On June 22, the Ulema Council announced the topics for sermons by imam-khatibs in the mosques on the June 26 Eid al-Fitr holiday that included taking measures against recruitment by extremist groups.

At the press conference on January 10, Deputy Chairman of the CRA, Jumakhon Ghiyosov, told the media that only imam-khatibs of Friday mosques and central Friday mosques had the right to perform *nikoh* (the Islamic marriage ceremony). Additionally, he said imam-khatibs should perform such ceremonies only with appropriate documentation from the registry office. This was to prevent cases of polygamous marriages or marriage to a minor. Those imam-khatibs who performed wedding ceremonies for second or third wives, were already removed from their positions, according to Ghiyosov. This new restriction on who could perform Islamic marriage ceremonies did not have the force of law, however, and according to the CRA, the committee was developing a methodology for instituting administrative action against those clergy not approved by government who were performing marriage ceremonies.

In January officials in the prosecutor's office in Kulob stated in a press conference that 10 imam-khatibs in villages near Kulob had been punished for "irresponsibility and mismanagement" of the mosques under their supervision.

According to the officials, the government fined all of the imam-khatibs and put the mosques under stricter control.

Multiple sources reported on conversion of mosques into other facilities. The prosecutor's office stated in a press conference there were 72 official mosques functioning in Kulob, and authorities had turned 54 unofficial mosques into sports facilities, residential properties, a local inspector's office, a kindergarten, and medical stations.

The U.S.-based news organization EurasiaNet reported authorities converted 2,000 mosques into facilities for general public use during the year. Husein Shokirov, head of the CRA, said in a news conference "We gave the owners of the mosques time to file [registration] documents, but they didn't do it, so the sites were either reclaimed by the government or repurposed into social facilities." The committee said there were 3,900 mosques operating with proper permits in the country. According to Forum 18, a human rights activist said the committee's claim that the mosques were illegal was not credible. She added many mosques refused to complain about their closure, even when she offered legal assistance to bring court cases, because "they were afraid to do so."

On July 21, Khujand Mayor Maruf Muhammadzoda told the media that during the first half of the year, authorities closed four mosques in Khujand lacking proper registration and turned them into other types of facilities: a workshop for producing traditional national textiles, a kindergarten, a teahouse, and a drug store. Muhammadzoda denied the closures reflected a crackdown on religious freedom, noting that in Khujand there were 42 mosques, including 37 five-time prayer mosques and five Friday mosques. He said mosques were closed down and turned into other types of facilities because they lacked proper documentation or were located nearby other mosques.

On July 12, speaking at a press conference, Sulaymon Davlatzoda, Chairman of the CRA, told media that five-time prayer mosques could hold religious training courses if they provided appropriate conditions for conducting classes. He said because the courses were educational, mosques would need a license from the Ministry of Education and Science. As of the end of the year, no mosques received the license necessary to offer religious training, although several applied.

The Ulema Council in July stated on its website Friday prayers should be held at mosques only with official permission. The statement came in response to a question from a reader, and the Ulema Council advised him that if his council

mosque were banned from holding Friday prayers, he should go to another mosque.

There were reports of governmental action against students studying abroad. At his July press conference, CRA Chairman Davlatzoda said that legislation required citizens to receive initial religious education inside the country before traveling abroad for further religious education. At his July 21 news conference, Khujand Mayor Muhammadzoda said the city administration repatriated more than 60 persons studying at religious schools abroad. He said only three students remained, in Saudi Arabia, and authorities were pressuring those students to return.

On November 2, the Akhbor news agency reported the CRA sent a statement to all mosques requiring them to dismiss all imam-khatibs who had studied abroad and to replace them with imams who had only studied in the country. The highest Islamic cleric of the country, Mufti Saidmukarram Abdulqodirzoda, was a graduate of a Pakistani religious school. It was unknown whether this decision would affect him.

NGOs reported authorities continued to enforce their ban on “nontraditional or alien” clothing. The Code of Administrative Violations does not list wearing a beard or the hijab or other religious clothing as violations, but citizens wearing these items reportedly received fines under other regulations. On July 11, President Rahmon stated during a speech marking the 10th anniversary of a national law regulating traditions, celebrations, and ceremonies that persons were not to wear beards or hijabs. He further stated hijabs and black dresses for women were not in line with the country’s traditions, and beards were not necessarily a reflection of religiosity. He called on citizens to “love God with their hearts” and not seek to show their “righteousness” through external attributes.

On September 26, media reports stated authorities took a resident of Khujand, Nargis Qurbonova, to the local police station for her refusal to take off her hijab. She told media police visited her house, asking her to take off her hijab. When she refused, they forced her to go to the police station with her son but released her later in the day, and she returned home. Qurbonova stated two police officers entered her house without any notice. One of them was a local inspector who had previously asked her to remove her hijab. She refused and said there was no legal requirement. After her detention, she called the helpline for the MIA as well as for the Department of Internal Affairs of Sughd Region, informing them of this incident. Once media reported news of her detention, police officers from the regional department visited her and asked her to submit a written statement about

the incident. The MIA informed media organizations it was investigating the case. Qurbonova previously taught English at a local university, but four years ago when she began wearing the hijab, she said the university forced her to quit. Qurbonova told media she would continue to wear the hijab.

Media reports stated that on September 26, authorities detained Muhabbatkhon Davlatova, a resident of Ghafurov District, during a police raid at the Panjshanbe market in Khujand. She stated police threatened to take her to the local police station and force her to write a statement explaining why she was wearing a hijab. Davlatova commented to media, “I was released as soon as I said I would complain to the Prosecutor General’s Office.” According to Davlatova other women questioned by police officers did not argue and tied their scarves or veils in a way that exposed their necks. Three months prior to her September 26 detention, at the Atush market, police had “advised” Davlatova to stop wearing clothing “alien” to the country. Davlatova wrote a statement to the prosecutor’s office of Ghafurov District, to which that office responded the officers were acting within the law. In a letter from the prosecutor’s office, authorities stated that since 2015 groups of police officers and other authorities were working to dissuade individuals from wearing “alien clothing.” There were no references to specific enforcement guidelines, however.

In a video of a sermon posted on social media, Muhtadi Ahmadkhojaev, a prominent imam, strongly criticized government policy on hijabs and beards. He said, “Our beards were removed, our wives’ hijabs were removed, doors of mosques are closed, madrassas are closed, and now they are calling through ‘Open Microphone’ [a program on government TV in which individuals espouse their views on various subjects] to ban sacrificing [of animals per Islamic tradition]. This is no sign of prosperity; and it is democracy, not Islam.” According to Ahmadkhojaev, the campaign against hijabs and sacrifices was un-Islamic. After giving the sermon, Ahmadkhojaev left for Russia, according to media reports. Reports stated law enforcement officials requested his return to Tajikistan. Upon his return on August 25, law enforcement officials summoned and questioned him about the sermon. Ahmadkhojaev told district authorities the video was a forgery. Jaloliddini Balkhi district authorities said they initiated no criminal case against him.

On August 16, officials of the Committee on Women and Family Affairs told media they conducted “interviews” with 8,000 women in Dushanbe, and approximately 90 percent of the women interviewed agreed not to wear “religious

dress” and instead wear “Tajik national clothes.” Most women said they started to wear hijabs because of family pressure.

On July 12, speaking at a news conference, Deputy Chairman of the CRA Azizulloh Mirzozoda announced government plans to introduce regulations on clothing and appearance into national law. At the same news conference, the head of the Islamic Center, Saidmukarram Abdulqodirzoda, said historically Tajik society was not accustomed to women wearing black and regarded it as rude. He further stated sharia did not require women to wear black clothing.

On July 21, Minister of Culture Shamsuddin Orumbekzoda told the media that the government had set up a commission to promote clothing it deemed appropriate for its citizens, which he said was an initiative aimed at combating “alien” culture. Speaking at a press conference, he said the commission would assist in designing clothing for men and women “taking into consideration Tajik traditions” and “modern life.” According to Orumbekzoda, the hijab was not compatible with the country’s hot climate for reasons of hygiene. Moreover, women wearing the hijab could spark “fear and doubt” in public places. He said, “Some persons standing next to them might wonder, ‘What if she is hiding something under her hijab?’”

On November 29, Russian news agency Sputnik reported authorities would provide women sketches of national clothes for all seasons. The report said, “Sketches of models of women's clothing, designed for all ages and all seasons, were prepared by three departments: the Ministry of Culture, the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, and the Committee on Youth Affairs.” According to the report, authorities launched this initiative to prevent the dissemination of “alien” culture associated with religious affiliation among the citizens, and to promote national clothing for women and girls. As soon as the government approved the outfits, sketches were expected to be published on the Ministry of Culture’s website.

On September 6, millions of mobile communications subscribers received text messages from the government on national dress. The previous day the government Committee on Women and Family Affairs asked all mobile communication companies to send out messages calling for women to wear national dress. The SMS messages stated, “Wearing national dress is a must!” “Respect national dress,” and “Let us make it a good tradition to wear national dress.” There were reportedly no legal sanctions associated with the campaign.

On March 14, media reported MIA officials had searched for women wearing hijabs at a Dushanbe medical facility and forced a local woman to remove her hijab. The MIA denied its officials forced women to remove their hijabs and said forcible removal was against the law. Instead, ministry officials stated the ministry regularly organized public education campaigns to promote traditional national dress for women.

In May media reported the Committee on Youth, Sports, and Tourism was developing an ethics code which would preclude the participation of athletes in competitions if they wore beards or hijabs. Suhrobi Akbarsho, a representative of the committee, said the regulation was intended to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. He also said hijabs were not comfortable for some types of sports. In August the committee finalized and adopted the code and set up a commission to monitor its implementation. The code contained a stipulation it would be reviewed once a year, at which time experts would consider complaints against the code.

On July 3, the Department on Women and Family Affairs of the Sughd Regional Administration held a meeting in Khujand to begin establishing working groups to strengthen the fight against “alien culture.” All relevant agencies of Sughd Region and Khujand attended the meeting. At the meeting, the regional administration created 21 working groups of government personnel and civilians and developed a plan of action for eliminating “alien” clothing, specifically the hijab and *satr* (a hair covering similar to the hijab). On July 4, the working groups started urging women not to wear “alien” clothing, visiting localities, trading centers, sewing workshops, kindergartens, health centers, schools, and restaurants.

On July 15, the Minister of Health and Social Protection Nasim Olimzoda called for a ban of “alien clothing” at all health care institutions, including medical educational institutions.

On July 18, national television channel *Jahonamo* showed a video in which officials from the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, including the head of the committee, Idigul Qosimzoda, stopped women wearing hijabs in the streets of Dushanbe and told them to wear traditional attire instead.

On July 21, speaking at a news conference, the rector of the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan, Tojiddin Asomuddinoda, noted the institute had prepared its own guidelines on “Tajik style” clothing for female students in accordance with Islamic law requirements. According to Asomuddinoda, female students would

henceforth “not need to wear alien Arab, Iranian, Turkish, or Afghan clothing,” which was widely interpreted to mean that women should not wear hijabs.

On July 28, the Committee on Women and Family Affairs announced at news conference it launched a campaign against “indecent clothing alien to the national culture and religion.” First Deputy Chair Marhabo Olimi told media that its effort focused not only on hijabs but also on indecent and immodest clothing “alien to our national culture and religion.”

At a July news conference, Chief of the Department of Internal Affairs in the Sughd Region General Sharif Nazarzoda said, “Having a beard has guidelines. There is a beard culture. When some join extremist groups and parties, their first duty is to have a beard and wear hijabs. They return home and force their spouses to wear hijabs.” He stated police did not shave individuals’ beards but sometimes ordered the population to “take care” of their beards.

On August 3, a media report stated authorities of the southern Dusti District asked the imam-khatibs of the mosques to shorten their beards to three centimeters (1.2 inches). Authorities explained they were setting an example to help propagate the “national culture.” One of the imam-khatibs was reported to have stated, that even if according to his *madhab* (school of Islamic thought) the length of a beard should be at least six centimeters (2.4 inches), he could not refuse the authorities’ request.

According to social media users, on August 5, representatives of the MIA and CRA stopped women wearing hijabs at the Shohmansur Market in Dushanbe, recorded their names, and brought some of them to MIA offices for further questioning. The social media users said some of the women removed their hijabs at the gate of the bazaar due to this pressure, and that government representatives told those gathered at the market that the women who violated the law would pay fines up to 1,000 somoni (\$110). While there did not appear to be any legal provisions for levying fines, there was reportedly no unified guidance on enforcement, which observers said resulted in punitive actions of various kinds being taken against women wearing hijabs, including fines.

On August 7, Umarjoni Emomali, head of the Press Service at the MIA, stated in an interview with Radio Ozodi that police officers would not fine anyone for wearing foreign garments, including the hijab and *satr*, or “indecent” clothing. According to him, authorities were reminding women that hijabs, *satrs*, and turbans were foreign to the traditions of the nation’s people. In the same interview, First Deputy Chair of the Committee on Women and Family Affairs Olimi said the

committee's specialists would soon prepare guidelines for clothing that reflected the national culture and traditions.

On August 10, the media reported one television personality stated that on August 9, two officials at the Qariyai Bolo Hospital in Dushanbe approached his wife and him for “explanatory” checks and treated them rudely because he had a beard and his wife was wearing a hijab. One of the officials threatened him with future fines. When he asked the two inspectors to justify their actions, they responded they were obliged to follow the law.

On August 16, the Ministry of Education and Science issued a manual on its website providing requirements for the clothing of schoolchildren. The guidelines include restrictions on hijabs, as well as other clothing, and on jewelry and fashion items with no particular religious significance. The ministry stated its introduction of these regulations underscored the importance of conforming to national, cultural, and moral norms.

On October 9, media reported a police officer in the northern city of Konibodom stopped a group of bearded men and brought them to the local police station, stating all the city’s bearded men needed to be registered. The detained men explained they worked in the town’s theater, and beards were required for their performance. The police issued the men a special beard exemption card, giving them permission to wear their beards in public.

A media report from September 18 quoted a source at the prosecutor general’s office as saying those women fined for wearing hijabs could appeal to the prosecutor’s office. The source confirmed that, in accordance with norms and amendments to the law regulating traditions, ceremonies, and rituals adopted at the end of August, no penalty had yet been designated for wearing the *satr* or hijab. The source further noted, according to a court decision, individuals and legal entities could be fined for violating the provisions of this law.

On October 9, media reported authorities in the Rudaki District were launching an investigation into an incident in which Shokir Holodorov, a council member in the village of Mehrobod, used obscene language at a local mosque and demanded its closure. A video of the incident was posted on the internet shortly afterwards. Firuza Kamolova, deputy chairman of the Rudaki District leadership body, reported the village council member had been called in to discuss his behavior with the district leadership body and the local department of the State National Security Committee. Following the incident security officials temporarily closed this

mosque. Holodorov explained the mosque in question was operating without registration from the CRA, and he had asked it cease its operations on previous occasions before this incident. After posting a video of the incident online, media organization Akhbor.com reported access to its website had been blocked within the country. Social media followers expressed outrage on Facebook at Holodorov's behavior.

The government continued to restrict distribution of religious literature; made school attendance mandatory on the Eid al-Adha; limited the numbers of those allowed to go on the Hajj; and defined acceptable practices for children attending mosques and for funeral observances.

In August the Customs Service stated to the media that, during the first half of the year, it had identified six cases in which religious literature was illegally imported into the country and sold. The Customs Service confirmed the sale of a large batch of unauthorized religious literature at the Panjsher trading center of Dushanbe. During a joint raid on the Panjsher trading center, officials of the Customs Service and Dushanbe Department of the Committee on National Security found approximately 100 types of literature it deemed illegal, totaling approximately 4,000 copies. The government determined the literature did not go through appropriate CRA vetting and prevented importation and distribution of the materials. The books were from Pakistan, Iran, Libya, Egypt and Russia. The Customs Service brought court cases against those selling this literature.

On August 23, the Ulema Council of the Islamic Center announced the country would celebrate Eid al-Adha, a designated national holiday, on September 1, like other Muslim countries. The holiday coincided with the first day of the new school year. While constitutional provisions require that citizens be kept free from school or work obligations on official holidays, the Ministry of Education kept schools open on September 1, and made school attendance on that day mandatory for all teachers and students.

On June 20, the CRA announced it had barred citizens under the age of 40 from performing the Hajj, in order to give older individuals a greater chance to undertake the pilgrimage. The CRA's imposition of age restrictions was similar to past years, when the government also imposed age restrictions on Hajj travel. In 2015, the minimum age was 35.

On September 11, a pilgrim returning from Mecca told media that, while still in the airport, officials from the CRA stated new amendments to the law on the

regulation of traditions banned celebrations and ceremonies in honor of those returning from the Hajj. Afshin Muqim, a spokesperson at the CRA, told media that pilgrims could distribute holy water from the Zamzam well, and dried dates brought back from the pilgrimage, but *Hojioshi* or *Hojitalbon* ceremonies in honor of those returned from the Hajj, which were traditionally held in the past, were prohibited.

In September the CRA released new guidelines forbidding family and friends from loud wailing or ululating, or hiring others to do so, at funerals and advised citizens not to wear black at funerals.

On June 2, during his sermon at the Qaramishqor Friday mosque in Dushanbe, the imam-khatib told attendees that parents who allowed their children to attend *taraweeh* prayers (special prayers performed only during Ramadan) would be subject to a government fine. According to the imam-khatib, a government inspector had come to the mosque that day and reiterated that parents should forbid their children from attending mosques. The imam-khatib said the officials also told the imam that law enforcement officers would be posted at the entrances of mosques to register all juveniles attending mosques and levy fines on their parents. The imam-khatib urged his followers to ensure children prayed only at home until age 18.

In January Rector of the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan Asomuddinzoada, informed the media that for the 2016-17 academic year, the number of students at the institute had dropped by almost 40 percent. There were only 197 first year students enrolled for 308 slots; 102 studied for a fee, and the remaining were free of charge. He offered no reason for the decline. The Islamic Institute of Tajikistan is the only higher educational institution in the country offering a religious education.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Individuals outside government continued to state they were reluctant to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or discrimination on the basis of religious belief. Civil society representatives said discussion of religion in general, especially relations between various religious groups, remained a subject they avoided. People said they felt more comfortable discussing violations of civil rights than discussing sectarian disagreements or government curtailment of religious freedom.

Leaders of some minority religious groups stated their communities had positive relationships with the majority Hanafi Sunni population, whom they said did not hinder their worship services or cause concern for their congregation. Other minority religious group leaders, especially from proselytizing religious groups, stated their members experienced social disapproval from friends and neighbors because they were no longer Muslims.

On September 20, a video and written interview with a woman named Farangis, a 21-year-old resident of Dushanbe, whose face was blurred in the video to protect her identity, was published on the Radio Ozodi website. In the video, Farangis stated she had become an atheist, which made her life difficult in society. Farangis stated she felt significant pressure from acquaintances and even friends. Some comments on the article and in social media showed support for her decision, but many others accused her of trying to propagate atheism and were openly hostile to her.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officers and visiting U.S. officials met with government officials to encourage them to adhere to their international commitments to respect freedom of religion and belief. In meetings with government officials, embassy officers continued to raise the restrictions on minors and women participating in religious services, rejection of attempts by minority religious groups to register, restrictions on the religious education of youth, and limitations on the publication or import of religious literature, as well as the lack of due process in court cases involving religious extremism. Embassy officers also raised the issue of harassment of women and men for religious dress and grooming.

On June 13, the embassy held an iftar with religious community leaders and government officials responsible for policy on religious issues, including representatives from the CRA. Topics of discussion included the state of religious freedom in the country, local religious traditions, and government policy.

The Charge d'Affaires wrote an op-ed to highlight Religious Freedom Day (January 16), which was published in all the local newspapers. The Ambassador stressed the importance of religious freedom as a central tenet of U.S. policy.

Since 2016, Tajikistan has been designated 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

22, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.