

TAJIKISTAN 2018 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 both that “[t]he citizen shall have the right to participate in the creation of political parties, including parties of democratic, religious and atheistic character” and, separately, that “[r]eligious organizations 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 under 18 from participating in public religious activities. Amendments to the religion law, which came into effect in January, require religious organizations to report all activity to the state, require state approval for the appointments of all imams, and increase control over religious education within the country and on those traveling abroad for religious education. The amendments allow restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion to ensure the rights and freedoms of others, public order, protection of foundations of the constitutional order, security of the state, defense of the country, public morals, public health, and the territorial integrity of the country. The government Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) maintains 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. A Khujand city court sentenced Abdullo Saidulloev, former imam of Sari Sang mosque in Khujand to six years’ imprisonment for promulgating Salafi ideas. Since 2016, authorities sentenced approximately 20 imams to prison in Sughd Region for membership in banned extremist organizations. A Khujand city court sentenced Shukrullo Ahrorov, former imam of Ikhlos Mosque, to five years in prison for involvement in an extremist organization. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government-supported Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying at mosques. 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. On October 5, the State National Security Services (SNSS) detained a group of 18 Jehovah’s Witnesses, including minors, who were leaving a private home in Dushanbe after a religious service. After holding 10 of the members for most of the day, the SNSS released them but threatened they soon would be charged and prosecuted. The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported a separate incident on

January 21, when authorities summoned a male Jehovah's Witness to the police station in Khujand; the police had raided his home in 2017. During the four-hour interrogation, Jehovah's Witnesses sources stated that a police officer beat the individual so severely that he suffered a concussion and sought immediate medical treatment. Authorities continued a pattern of harassing women wearing hijabs and men with beards, and government officials again issued statements discouraging women from wearing "nontraditional or alien" clothing, including religious dress. According to the NGO Forum 18, on September 28, authorities set up a roadblock on the outskirts of the capital to stop cars carrying men with beards and women in hijabs. Police forced the bearded men into a barber's shop to have their beards shaved off and forced the women to take off their hijabs and wear shawls showing their necks.

A group pledging allegiance to ISIS claimed responsibility for the July killing of four foreign tourists, including two Americans, and the injuring of three others when the attackers drove a car into a group of cyclists. Authorities said the leader of the attack was a member of the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party, which the government outlawed in 2015. Members of the Christian community reported that cemeteries in southern Khatlon Region were desecrated, with fences, crosses, memorial plates, and tomb ornaments looted for the value of their metal. 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.

The Charge d'Affaires and embassy staff encouraged the government to adhere to its commitments to respect religious freedom. Embassy officers also raised concerns about government restrictions on religious practices, including the participation of women and minors in religious services; rejection of attempts of minority religious organizations to register; restrictions on the religious education of youth; harassment of those wearing religious attire; and limitations on the publication or importation of religious literature. Embassy officers met with religious leaders and civil society groups to address the same issues and discuss concerns over government restrictions on the ability of minority religious groups to practice their religion freely.

On November 28, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a Country of Particular Concern ("CPC") under section 402(b) of the Act, for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The Secretary also announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interest of the United States pursuant to section 407 of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.6 million (July 2018 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, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and Jews. The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox; there are also Baptists, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, 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 with others to profess any religion or no religion, and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies.

The establishment and activities of religious associations promoting racism, nationalism, enmity, social and religious hatred, or calling for the violent overthrow of constitutional order and organizing of armed groups is prohibited. The constitution states, “The citizen shall have the right to participate in the creation of political parties, including parties of democratic, religious and atheistic character.” The constitution prohibits “propaganda and agitation” encouraging 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.

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

A religious association is a voluntary association of followers of one faith, with the purpose of holding joint worship and celebration of religious ceremonies, religious education, as well as spreading religious beliefs. In order to register a religious association, a group of at least 10 persons over the age of 18 must obtain a certificate from local authorities confirming adherents of their religious faith have lived in a local area for five years. The group must then submit to the CRA proof of the citizenship of its founders, along with their home address and date of birth. The group must provide an account of its beliefs and religious practices and describe its attitudes related to education, family, and marriage. It must also provide documentation on the health of its adherents. A religious association must provide information on its religious centers such as mosques, central prayer houses, religious educational institutions, churches, and synagogues. The group must specify in its charter the activities it plans to undertake, and once registered as a religious association, must report annually on its activities or face deregistration.

A religious community is a voluntary and independent association of citizens, formed for the purpose of holding joint worship and the satisfaction of other religious needs. Types of religious communities include Friday mosques, five-time prayer mosques, prayer houses, and places of worship. A religious community functions on the basis of a charter, after registering with the CRA without forming a legal entity. The nature and scope of its activities are determined by the charter. Religious communities are required to register both locally and nationally and must register “without the formation of a legal personality.” A religious community must adhere to the “essence and limits of activity” set out in its charter.

A religious organization is a voluntary and independent association of citizens, formed for the purpose of holding joint worship, religious education, and spreading of religious faith. Types of religious organizations include the Republican Religious Center, central Friday mosques, central prayer houses religious

education entities, churches, and synagogues. Religious organizations are legal entities and function on the basis of charters. They can be a district, city, or national organization.

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 activities. The law imposes fines for carrying out religious activities without state registration; 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, the government fines individuals 350 to 500 somoni (\$37 to \$53), heads of religious associations 1,000 to 1,500 somoni (\$110 to \$160), and registered religious associations, as legal entities, 5,000 to 10,000 somoni (\$530 to \$1,100). For the same offenses repeated within a year of applying first fines, fines are increased to 600 to 1,000 somoni (\$64 to \$110) for individuals, 2,000 to 2,500 somoni (\$210 to \$270) for heads of religious associations, and 15,000 to 20,000 somoni (\$1,600 to \$2,100) for registered religious associations. If a religious association conducts activities without registering, local authorities may impose additional fines or close a place of worship.

In late 2017 parliament amended the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which entered into force in January. According to these amendments, restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion are allowed only to ensure the rights and freedoms of others, public order, protection of foundations of the constitutional order, security of the state, defense of the country, public morals, public health, and the territorial integrity of the country.

The amended law states that freedom of conscience and worship may only be restricted for reasons such as ensuring the rights of others, maintaining public order, ensuring state security, defending the country, upholding public morality, promoting public health, and safeguarding the country's territorial integrity. The amendments also stipulate that no party, public or religious association, movement or group may be recognized as state ideology. Religious activities that promote racism, nationalism, hostility, social and religious hatred, or calling for violent overthrow of the constitutional order or the organization of armed groups are prohibited. The amended law also says that the state maintains control over the order of religious education in order to prevent illegal training, propaganda, and the dissemination of extremist ideas, religious hatred, and hostility.

The amendments broadly empower the CRA to create regulations to implement state policies on religion, such as establishing specific guidelines for the performance of religious ceremonies. The CRA maintains 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 state controls activities of religious associations related to the performance of religious rites, and developing and adopting 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, lists of property, expenditures, numbers of employees and payments of wages, paid taxes, and other information upon request by an authorized state body for religious affairs.

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 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 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. The government allows “Friday” mosques, which conduct larger Friday prayers as well as prayers five times per day, in districts with populations of 10,000 to 20,000 persons; it allows “five-time” mosques, which conduct only daily prayers five times per day, in areas with populations of 100 to 1,000. In Dushanbe, authorities allow Friday mosques in areas with 30,000 to 50,000 persons, and five-time 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 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 chief khatibs (government-sanctioned prayer leaders at a central Friday mosque), imam-

khatibs (prayer leaders in a Friday mosque, who deliver a sermon at Friday noon prayers) and imams (prayer leaders in five-time mosques) shall take place in coordination with “the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs.” The CRA must approve the imam-khatibs and imams elected by the founders of each mosque. 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 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 must be carried out according to the procedures for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and peaceful processions prescribed elsewhere in the law. 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.

According to the law, “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 Code of Administrative Violations does not list the wearing of a beard, hijab, or other religious clothing as violations.

The law allows registered religious organizations to produce, export, import, and distribute religious literature and materials with religious content with the advanced 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 confiscation of the given literature, as well as fines of 1,500 to 3,500 somoni (\$160 to \$370) for individuals; 2,500 to 7,500 somoni (\$270 to \$800) for government officials; and 5,000 to 15,000 somoni (\$530 to \$1,600) for legal entities, a category including all organizations.

The law prohibits children and youth under 18 from participating in “public religious activities,” including attending worship services at public places of worship. Children may attend religious funerals and practice religion at home, under parental guidance. The law allows children to participate in religious

activities that are part of specific educational programs in authorized religious institutions.

The law requires all institutions or groups wishing to provide religious instruction to obtain CRA permission, but in practice such permission is not granted. 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 in accordance with their charter and if licensed by the government.

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 that is already part of a 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 they express 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 (\$270 to \$530) for violating these restrictions.

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

Government Practices

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that on January 21, authorities summoned a male Jehovah's Witness to the police station in Khujand; the police had raided his home in 2017. During a four-hour interrogation, Jehovah's Witnesses sources stated that a police officer beat the individual so severely that he suffered a concussion and sought immediate medical treatment. A police officer followed him, pressured the hospital staff not to provide medical test results, and compelled the doctor to write a false statement denying the injuries. On February 1, the chief of the Police Department and the chief of the Criminal Investigation Department summoned the victim and his wife for interrogation. The police ordered the couple

to write a statement declaring they were Jehovah's Witnesses. Fearing for their safety, the couple moved to another city.

According to April 22 media reports, the Khujand city court sentenced Abdullo Saidulloev, former imam-khatib of the Sari Sang five-time prayer mosque in Khujand, to six years' imprisonment. Authorities charged him with promulgating Salafi ideas. He had studied in a Saudi Arabia madrassah from 2004 to 2006, and after returning started working in the clergy. Police detained him in October 2017 after law enforcement seized 200 copies of banned literature from his home, which was described as extremist by the authorities.

Since 2016, the government sentenced approximately 20 imams to prison in Sughd Region for membership in banned extremist organizations. Most received religious education abroad. Local and international human rights organizations, however, said the government suppressed opposition figures under the aegis of combating terrorism and extremism.

On April 30, Radio Ozodi, part of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, reported Khujand city court sentenced Shukrullo Ahrorov, former imam of Ikhlos Mosque, to five years in prison for involvement in Ikhvon-al-Muslimin, which the government banned in 2006 as an extremist organization. The court ruling also stated that Ahrorov preached extremist ideas to worshipers at the mosque in 2015. The court said law enforcement officers seized illegal religious literature from Ahrorov's home. Police charged Ahrorov with the article of the criminal code that covers participation in the activities of political parties, public associations, and religious or other organizations banned by the court. Ahrorov's relatives stated he might appeal.

In December police arrested Mukhtadi Abdulkodyrov shortly after he returned to the country after working for four years in Saudi Arabia. Sources stated that police arrested him for his ties to Salafi Islam, which the Supreme Court banned from the country in 2009. Prior to his return from Saudi Arabia, the Interior Ministry contacted him through social media promising to drop all charges against him if he agreed to abandon Salafism. Abdulkodyrov agreed and wrote a "repentance letter" to the ministry, but still faced a possible eight-year prison sentence.

In September Belarusian border guards arrested Parviz Tursunov, a former soccer player, based on an extradition request from the government. The government sought his extradition for being a member of a Salafi Muslim group. He and his family crossed into Belarus from Ukraine in an attempt to reach Poland and apply

for asylum. In November Belarusian officials rejected the extradition request and released Tursunov back into Ukraine. Tursunov remained in Ukrainian custody at the end of the year.

Bakhrom Kholmatov, former pastor of the Sunmin Sunbogym Protestant Church in Khujand, remained in prison and continued to refuse to undertake a second appeal of his sentence. His wife stated that she had visited him and he appeared well, but said prison authorities would not allow her to visit for months at a time and they did not give him letters of encouragement written to him from Christians around the world. After Forum 18 contacted prison authorities about the letters, they said that Kholmatov was now receiving them.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, on October 5, the SNSS detained a group of 18 Jehovah's Witnesses, including minors, who were leaving a private home in Dushanbe after a religious service. The police released eight young women, but detained the rest of the group, comprised of both men and women, for questioning before releasing all 10 late in the day. The SNSS reportedly threatened that they shortly would be charged and prosecuted. On January 24 and 30, Jehovah's Witnesses stated that police in a settlement near Khujand summoned and interrogated more than a dozen Jehovah's Witnesses "for converting from Islam to Christianity." The police demanded that they renounce their faith.

On October 2, media reported that Daniil Islomov, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, was sent to a military unit in Bokhtar city (formerly Qurghonteppa), after completing a six-month prison sentence for evading military conscription. The government also denied Islomov an opportunity to perform alternative civilian service, although he was soon discharged from the army. Stefan Steiner, a representative of the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, told the media that authorities had effectively punished Islomov twice: first with a prison sentence and second by forcing him to wear a military uniform. In addition to his prison sentence, Islomov spent six months in pre-trial detention. At year's end, Islomov was in the process of filing a complaint with the UN Human Rights Council about his arrest and imprisonment.

In November an eight-year-old elementary school student and member of Jehovah's Witnesses in the northern city of Konibodom was reported to school authorities for refusing to sing the national anthem or wear the school uniform tie which contained national symbols. He was labeled a "traitor" and threatened with expulsion. On November 28, after complaints from school officials, police reportedly took him to a local police station without parental notification and

showed him a jail cell. The city prosecutor's office also threatened to take action against the boy's mother for "raising him in an unacceptable way." Soon after the incident, Konibodom city police opened a criminal case against the mother, but did not explain what crime she allegedly committed. On December 11, police presented her with a written summons for questioning, but she refused to comply with the summons.

On August 21, media reported that after Eid al-Adha prayers, police detained several young men with beards near a mosque in Obi Garm town. There was no information on the identity of those detained.

In November police detained three residents of Ruknobod village in Panjakent District, including two teenagers, on charges of cooperating with extremist groups. Residents of the village said these three individuals were arrested for clicking the "like" button on "extremist" social media posts.

Officials continued to prevent members of minority religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, from registering their groups as associations with the government.

Media reported that the government denied religious funerals for approximately 50 prisoners killed in a November Khujand prison camp riot. The mother of one of the dead prisoners stated that authorities brought the body to a cemetery in Khujand and quickly buried it, forbidding family members to approach the coffin or perform religious rituals. She said that police claimed the ritual had already been carried out in prison.

Government officials continued to take measures they stated would 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 opposition 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 Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT).

On April 21, media reported on an April 11 public meeting in Dushanbe between General Sharif Nazarzoda, chief of the city's Department of Internal Affairs and imam-khatibs of local mosques. Nazarzoda warned the imam-khatibs to be

vigilant about congregants' behavior and pay attention to those worshipers who did not observe Hanafi belief or practices. Nazarzoda also reproached the clergy for not cooperating sufficiently with law enforcement agencies in the fight against extremism. Nazaroda reportedly reinforced his words by showing the photographs of 20 imam-khatibs in Sughd Region sentenced to long prison terms on charges of extremism.

At an August 2 press conference in Sughd, Suhrob Rustamzoda, head of the regional Department on Religious Affairs and Regulation of National Traditions, announced the dismissal of 16 imam-khatibs. Rustamzoda stated they did not pass certification. At the same time, he noted that the government preferred imams who were graduates of local universities. Rustamzoda also noted that operations in all five madrassahs in Sughd Region remained suspended until the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) granted them permission to operate and they had rectified shortcomings in their documentation. They have not been in operation since 2013.

On January 4, media reported that dozens of imams did not pass annual certification. A commission including CRA representatives and the government-supported Ulema Council conducted examination of imam-khatibs. The report did not specify the exact number of those dismissed. According to the report, the government has been requiring such an annual certification for the last nine years. Some imam-khatibs who did not pass the certification stated their dismissal was improper. CRA stated that some imam-khatibs could not answer questions on basic rules of performing prayers in accordance with the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, and could not differentiate between theology and Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*). At a July 25 press conference, head of the department on religious associations of the CRA Husein Shokirov said that 35 imam-khatibs did not pass certification and were dismissed from their duties at mosques. Authorities suspended the imam-khatibs from their jobs because they could not answer the questions of the certification commission; all questions were sent to the clergy 20 days in advance of the certification, Shokirov said.

Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the 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 August 30, media reported police officers stopped women wearing hijabs and men with beards in Dushanbe's Shohmansur district. Authorities demanded that the women remove their hijabs and men shave their beards. According to Forum 18, on September 28, authorities set up a roadblock on the outskirts of the capital to stop cars carrying men with beards and women in hijabs. Police forced the bearded men into a barbershop to have their beards shaved off and forced the women to take off their hijabs and wear shawls showing their necks. Forum 18 also reports hijab-wearing women were consistently refused medical care and employment. Tajik State Pedagogical University in Dushanbe announced on September 30 that female students wearing a traditional shawl covering the head could not attend lectures.

On March 2, Radio Ozodi reported that Fathullo Nazriev, imam-khatib from a five-time prayer mosque in Rasht District, sent an open letter to the country's president in which he stated that police officers in Rasht Valley pressured him to sign a statement accusing Junaidullo Khudoyorov of being a member of an illegal Salafi group. Khudoyorov previously criticized local authorities on social media and was arrested on January 22.

Media reported that the CRA dismissed an imam of a mosque in Panjakent for not knowing the national anthem. Naqibkhon Qoriev, a resident of the Yori District of Panjakent who was imam of the mosque early in the year, went through certification procedures in Dushanbe in early June. He told media on August 27 he was notified only then about the reason for his dismissal and that as a result, authorities appointed another clergyman in his place. He stated he was flustered during the certification procedure and could not fully read a verse about rules of performing pilgrimage, but stated he knew the anthem and recited part of it. Officials at the local Department of Religious Affairs confirmed that Qoriev was dismissed, stating he did not know the anthem and also had difficulties answering a question on rules for reading *namaz* (Islamic prayer). Saidjon Shodiev, head of the Religious Affairs Department, said that Qoriev failed on two occasions to pass the certification procedures and he could again apply for certification and be reinstated in his position.

Multiple sources reported on the conversion of mosques into other facilities. During a press conference on January 24, Chairman of Isfara city Dilshod Rasulzoda said that during 2017 the government closed down 45 mosques in Isfara due to poor sanitation. According to the official, local residents devised a proposal to convert the mosques into social facilities, kindergartens, and medical clinics. At a January 30 press conference, Chairman of Bobojon Ghafurov District Zarif

Alizoda stated that authorities closed down 46 mosques operating without authorization in his district in 2017. Ghafurov said the government was converting what he termed “illegal” mosques into social service centers, sewing workshops, crafts training centers, trading centers, and other types of public facilities.

During a July 25 press conference, CRA Chairman Sulaymon Davlatzoda stated that some previously closed mosques would be allowed to reopen. According to Davlatzoda, an interdepartmental working group had been set up to review closure cases and facilitate the reopening of mosques. “There are *mahallas* (neighborhoods) where two or three mosques are registered, and there are *mahallas* and settlements where there is not a single mosque or religious association. The interdepartmental working group is studying all these issues, and on the results of the group's work, appropriate decisions will be made,” stated Davlatzoda. He also stated that when the parliament in late 2017 amended the religion law, “all religious associations had to be reregistered, but some failed to do so out of negligence... which led to the closure of some mosques.”

At a February 5 press conference, CRA officials stated that the government had converted 1,938 mosques that were functioning without authorization into cultural spaces, medical centers, kindergartens, teahouses, or residences for needy families. Authorities often closed mosques for lack of appropriate documentation, because many mosques were not registered at relevant offices as religious organizations after they were built. The government gave mosques a deadline to obtain proper documentation and those that failed to meet the deadline were shut down and public facilities set up at their location. Another 231 mosques were given time to formalize all relevant documents. According to CRA data, as of the end of 2017, 48 central Friday mosques, 326 Friday mosques, 3528 five-time prayer mosques, 67 non-Islamic religious associations, one Islamic center, and three prayer houses – a total of 3,973 religious associations, were registered in the country and all of them were functioning in accordance with the law and satisfying the religious needs of citizens.

Forum 18 stated the 2017 amendments to the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations allowed the state to restrict manifestations of freedom of religion based on a wide range of grounds not permitted under international human rights obligations, increased religious organizations’ requirements to report all activity to the state, required state approval for the appointments of all imams, and increased state control on both religious education at home, and on those traveling abroad for religious education. Separately, representatives of a church group said the newly amended law transferred some authority from the Ministry of

Justice to the CRA, which now had the right to register religious associations, control their activities, collect financial and other data, and adopt bills that could restrict (or expand) a religious association's activity.

The government stated that it controlled religious education both domestically and of its citizens abroad in order to prevent "illegal education, propaganda and dissemination of extremist ideas, religious hatred, and enmity." There were reports of governmental action against students studying abroad. At a February 5 press conference, CRA Chairman Davlatzoda said 3,694 citizens had been studying abroad at religious educational institutes. According to the CRA, 3,377 people had returned to the country; 88 of them returned to their former places of education. According to Davlatzoda, they went back abroad under the pretext of labor migration but in fact resumed religious studies. Some were working again but were also studying "illegally" on the side. Davlatzoda stated that 405 citizens were studying illegally at religious institutions in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan. According to 2017 CRA data, 60 individuals returned home from foreign madrassahs, with some of them continuing education inside the country.

On May 12, during a meeting with civil society representatives, President Emomali Rahmon stated that more than 3,400 citizens who had studied religion outside the country without authorization had returned to the country. He said parents and relatives should actively work to prevent their children from falling prey to destructive radical, terrorist, and extremist forces. He also noted that one of the main reasons youth attended religious educational institutions abroad in violation of the law was because some parents did not want them to have a purely secular education.

NGOs reported authorities continued to enforce the ban on "nontraditional or alien" clothing. On February 9, the *Tajikistan Times* published an op-ed by journalist Abdumudassir Ahmadov criticizing the decision of the National Library of Tajikistan to prevent the entrance of bearded men. Ahmadov said that in the past he had argued about beards with the members of the banned IRPT and asked them not to make beards a religious issue. He stated that now he was doing the same with state agencies to stop politicizing the issue of whether or not men wore beards.

On February 26, the Khovar state-run news agency reported that the Ministry of Culture (MOC) had proposed guidelines for national dress, which were awaiting government approval. An official from the MOC told the media the reason for creating clothing guidelines was "to prevent the impact of foreign cultures" on

national traditions. Minister of Culture Shamsiddin Orumbekzoda told journalists during a February 7 press conference that the ministry would soon publish a book about the “ethics of wearing clothes.” He said the book was a recommendation aimed at presenting national culture and national and historical values so that citizens adequately represented their country. He noted the book would take into account norms of both national and European clothing and that throughout the world there were certain rules and “ethics of wearing clothes.”

On March 19, the *Asia Plus* news agency reported that the MOC issued recommendations on women’s clothing. The ministry published a book with sketches of female models entitled “Instruction on recommended clothes for girls and women in the Republic of Tajikistan” with guidance on how to dress for work in state agencies, for national and state holidays such as Navruz and Mehrigon, as well as for brides at weddings and family celebrations. It also described clothing not recommended for girls and women, which included forms of Islamic dress such as hijabs.

The government continued to restrict distribution of religious literature; reportedly scheduled a major exam on a date widely anticipated to be designated 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. The government continued to close for one-day national holidays in observance on both Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr.

On June 6, the Ulema Council refuted media reports stating that the MES had decided to hold exams on June 16, the Eid al Fitr holiday. On the following day, June 7, the Ulema Council declared that Eid al Fitr would be June 15.

On August 27, *Asia Plus* news agency reported that authorities set new restrictions on acceptable dimensions for graves “to prevent pomposity and the material well-being of citizens.” CRA representatives and local authorities are responsible for enforcing the decree.

On July 3, media reported that Imam of Nuri Islom Mosque in Khujand Ibodullo Kalonzoda proposed introducing Islam into the school curriculum strictly as an academic subject. Speaking at a roundtable entitled “Countering Terrorism and Extremism – the Main Factor in creating a Democratic and Legal society” held in Guliston in July, Kalonzoda noted that offering such a subject in high schools would be a way to counteract “distorted perceptions” of Islam.

On July 3, the Radio Ozodi website reported that the court of Norak town fined cleric Abdukarim Saidov 350 somoni (\$37) for providing illegal religious education. Authorities charged him with organizing religious education for eight children between six and 16 years old beginning in June 2017. The children's parents had paid Saidov 300 to 500 somoni (\$32 to \$53) a month along with groceries as payment. Saidov, a graduate of the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan, told the media he did not know it was illegal to organize religious lessons for children at home.

On July 8, Akhbor news agency reported that Khairullo Najmiddinov, Mahmadayub Junaidov, and Husein Rizoiev, three imams from Tojikobod District, were fined 500 somoni (\$53) each for establishing an illegal madrassah at home. The government also fined the children's parents.

On May 17, Radio Ozodi reported that imam-khatibs in mosques throughout the country were ordered to watch the play "Obu Otash" ("Water and Fire") by writer and playwright Mansur Surush, which, according to proponents, promoted tolerance and mocked religious fanaticism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A group pledging allegiance to ISIS claimed responsibility for the July killing of four foreign tourists, including two Americans, and the injuring of three others when the attackers drove a car into a group of cyclists. Following the collision, the assailants attacked the victims with knives and firearms. Authorities said the leader of the attack was a member of the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party, which the government had outlawed in 2015.

Individuals outside government continued to state that they were reluctant to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or discrimination based on religious belief. Civil society representatives said discussion of religion in general, especially relations between members of 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 congregations. 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. Members of the Baha'i Faith particularly noted they faced discrimination from many ordinary citizens. They said there were some in the country that viewed the Baha'i Faith as incompatible with Tajik nationality.

Members of the Christian community reported on the desecration of cemeteries in the southern Khatlon Region, with fences, crosses, memorial plates, and tomb ornaments looted for the value of their metal. According to local statistics, half of the 3,000 Christian graves in the region, which dated to the Soviet era, had been looted. An Orthodox Church rector in Bokhtar said he had visited the city's Christian cemetery and noted cattle grazing and children playing on the graves. In Yavan, another Khatlon district, thieves looted items from 50 graves in the area's two Christian cemeteries.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In August a visiting Department of State officer conducted an in-depth working visit to the country, meeting with independent analysts, religious leaders, and members of a wide array of faith communities, as well as government representatives from the CRA and the Center for Islamic Studies, to assess conditions on the ground and advocate for greater religious freedom. In meetings with government officials, the Charge d'Affaires and embassy officers continued to raise concerns regarding 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 belief. Embassy officers also raised the issue of harassment of women and men for religious dress and grooming.

On June 8, the embassy held an iftar with religious community leaders, civil society representatives, and government officials responsible for policy on religious issues, including representatives from the CRA and the Center for Islamic Studies. Topics of discussion included the state of religious freedom in the country, local religious traditions, and the impact of government policies.

On February 8, the embassy hosted a dinner for Religious Tolerance Day. Representatives of various religious groups, including religious minorities, attended the event. Participants discussed the state of religious freedom in the country and ways religious groups could further collaborate.

The Charge d’Affaires released an op-ed dedicated to Religious Freedom Day (January 16), which was published in all the local newspapers, including those printed in Tajik, Russian, and English. The Charge candidly discussed the challenges related to religious freedom in the country and the role religious freedom plays in the stability of a country.

Since 2016, Tajikistan has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 28, 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.