

TAJKISTAN 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right, individually or jointly with others, to adhere to any religion or to no religion, and to participate in religious customs and ceremonies. The constitution states religious associations shall be separate from the state and “shall not interfere in state affairs.” The law restricts Islamic prayer to specific locations, regulates the registration and location of mosques, and prohibits persons under the age of 18 from participating in public religious activities. The government Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) maintains a broad mandate that includes approving registration of religious associations, construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature. On September 10, a Khujand City court convicted Jehovah's Witness Shamil Khakimov of “inciting religious hatred,” sentencing him to seven-and-a-half years in a high security prison. On October 9, an appeals court upheld his conviction. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government-supported Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying at Hanafi Sunni mosques. There were reports that officials prevented Jehovah's Witnesses from registering their organization. Registered and unregistered religious organizations continued to be subject to police raids, surveillance, and forced closures. On February 22, international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 reported 17 Jehovah's Witnesses were detained for holding a joint service. Forum 18 reported police raids on Jehovah's Witnesses occurred in the northern cities of Khujand and Konibodom, and that police officers confiscated laptops, mobile phones, and passports. The Jehovah's Witnesses reported authorities detained and questioned adults regarding possessing religious material and participating in religious activities. The government continued to imprison approximately 20 imams in Sughd Region for membership in banned extremist organizations. 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. 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 hijabs.

Individuals outside government continued to state they were reluctant to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or

discrimination based on religious belief, due to fear of government harassment. Civil society representatives said discussion of religion in general, especially relations among members of different religious groups, remained a subject they avoided.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials encouraged the government to adhere to its commitments to respect religious freedom. Embassy officers raised concerns regarding 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. Throughout May the Ambassador and other embassy officers met with religious leaders and civil society groups to address these issues and to discuss concerns about government restrictions on the ability of minority religious groups to practice their religion freely.

In 2016, the country was designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 26, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and announced a waiver of the required sanctions that accompany designation in the “important national interest of the United States.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.7 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to local academics, the country is 90 percent Muslim, of whom 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.

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

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country a secular state and “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. In October 2007, the government banned the religious organization Jehovah's Witnesses for carrying out religious activities contrary to the country's laws. Jehovah's Witnesses refuse military service.

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

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. 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 the 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 addresses and dates of birth. The group must provide an account of its beliefs and religious practices and describe its attitudes related to education, family, and marriage. A religious

association must provide information on its houses of worship, which also includes religious centers, central prayer houses, and religious educational institutions. 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 other places of worship. A religious community functions on the basis of a charter, after registering with the CRA. 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 the 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 may 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 it assigns the CRA responsibility for issuing fines for such activities. The law imposes fines for carrying out religious activities without state registration or reregistration; violating 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 (\$36-\$52), heads of religious associations 1,000 to 1,500 somoni (\$100-\$160), and registered religious associations, as legal entities, 5,000 to 10,000 somoni (\$520-\$1,000). For the same offenses repeated within a year of applying first fines, penalties are increased to 600 to 1,000 somoni (\$62-\$100) for individuals, 2,000 to 2,500 somoni (\$210-\$260) for heads of religious associations, and 15,000 to 20,000 somoni (\$1,600-\$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.

The Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations allows restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion deemed necessary by the government to ensure the rights and freedoms of others, public order, protection of foundations of constitutional order, security of the state, defense of the country, public morals, public health, and the territorial integrity of the country. In addition, religious organizations must report all activity to the state, and the state must approve the appointments of all imams.

The amended Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations states freedom of conscience and worship may 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 representing state ideology. Religious activities promoting racism, nationalism, hostility, social and religious hatred, or calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order or the organization of armed groups are prohibited. The amended law also states the state maintains control over religious education to prevent illegal training, propaganda, and the dissemination of extremist ideas, religious hatred, and hostility.

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

The state controls activities of religious associations, such as the performance of religious rites, and the development and adoption of legal acts aimed at the implementation of a state policy on the freedom of conscience and religious associations. Religious associations must submit information on sources of income, property lists, expenditures, numbers of employees, wages and taxes paid, and other information upon request by an authorized state body responsible 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 that 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, to be located 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 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 (government-sanctioned prayer leaders in a Friday mosque, who deliver a sermon at Friday noon prayers), and imams (government-sanctioned prayer leaders in five-time mosques) shall take place in coordination with “the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs.” The CRA must approve 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 sometimes censors the content of Friday sermons.

The law regulates private celebrations, including weddings, funeral services, and observations of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. It 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. It bans the traditional sacrifice of animals at ceremonies marking the seventh and fortieth day after a death and the return of

Hajj travelers. Traditional sacrifices are permissible during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha holidays.

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 (not official) interpretation, “national dress” does not include the wearing of the hijab, although it does include a traditional Tajik form of covering a woman's head, known as *Ruymol*. 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 containing religious content after receiving CRA approval. Only registered religious associations and organizations are entitled to establish enterprises that produce literature and material with religious content. Such literature and material must indicate the full name of the religious organization producing it. The law allows government authorities to levy fines for the production, export, import, sale, or distribution of religious literature without CRA permission. 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-\$360) for individuals; 2,500 to 7,500 somoni (\$260-\$780) for government officials; and 5,000 to 15,000 somoni (\$520-\$1,600) for legal entities, a category that includes all organizations. According to the law, producing literature or material containing religious content without identifying the name of the religious organization producing it entails fines of 2,500 to 5,000 somoni (\$260-\$520) and confiscation of the material.

The law prohibits individuals under the age 18 from participating in “public religious activities,” including attending worship services at public places of worship. Individuals under 18 may attend religious funerals and practice religion at home, under parental guidance. The law allows individuals under 18 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 mandatory school hours. According to the law, this may not duplicate religious instruction that is already part of a school curriculum. As part of the high school curriculum, students must take “history of religions” classes. 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. It 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 degree in religious studies domestically and receive written consent from the CRA. The law stipulates fines of 2,500 to 5,000 somoni (\$260-\$520) for violating these restrictions.

The constitution requires men to serve two years in the armed forces. The law neither allows for conscientious objection on religious grounds nor allows conscientious objectors to perform alternative civilian service.

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

Government Practices

On February 1, according to Forum 18, authorities interrogated Shamil Khakimov, a 68-year-old Jehovah’s Witness, for eight hours regarding his membership in the community. After releasing him, security officials confiscated Khakimov’s computer, tablet computer, religious literature, and passport. They arrested him on February 26 and held him in pretrial custody in Khujand Investigation Prison. Forum 18 reported that during Khakimov’s detention, officials did not allow him access to a Bible. During his trial, which began on September 5, authorities said three local imams had analyzed Khakimov’s Bible at the government’s request and concluded that the Bible “causes confrontation and schism, leading to misunderstandings” within the country. On September 10, a Khujand City court convicted Khakimov of “inciting religious hatred” and sentenced him to seven-and-a-half years in a high-security prison. Khakimov also received a three-year

ban on engaging in religious activity following his release from prison. On October 9, an appeals court upheld his conviction.

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that on February 5, police searched the apartment of a female adherent in her absence, confiscated her passports, and interrogated her for eight hours about Khakimov. On February 6, police interrogated her again for five hours while hitting and threatening her. On the same day, police took the woman's 14-year-old son from school and interrogated him for five hours. On February 27, police questioned the woman again for three hours. She subsequently filed complaints with the office of the president, the regional prosecutor's office, and the government's ombudsman; the government provided no response.

On January 29, according to Forum 18, police reportedly took a female member of Jehovah's Witness to the police station and questioned her for six and a half hours, threatening to beat and imprison her, while leaving her unattended minor children at home. On January 30, police took a family of three Jehovah's Witnesses into custody. Authorities interrogated the parents for nine hours and their adult daughter for 20 hours. The daughter suffered a concussion after police pushed her against a wall. Police questioned the family repeatedly during February, with interrogations lasting between five and ten hours each time.

On February 22, Forum 18 reported police detained 17 Jehovah's Witnesses for holding a joint service. Forum 18 said police raids against Jehovah's Witnesses occurred in the northern cities of Khujand and Konibodom, and that police officers confiscated laptops, mobile phones, and passports. The Jehovah's Witnesses reported authorities detained and questioned adults regarding possessing religious material and participating in religious activities.

The government continued to imprison approximately 20 imams in Sughd Region, most of whom had received religious education abroad, for membership in banned extremist organizations. Local and international human rights organizations said the government "intimidates and arrests" opposition figures on the pretext of combating terrorism and extremism.

On March 23, Radio Ozodi, an affiliate of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), reported an Ismoili Somoni District court sentenced Mukhtadi Abdulkodyrov to probation. In December 2018, police arrested Abdulkodyrov shortly after he returned to the country after working for four years in Saudi Arabia. Sources stated police arrested him for his ties to Salafi Islam, which the

Supreme Court banned in 2009. Radio Ozodi reported that prior to Abdulkodyrov's return from Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) had 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.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that on August 13, authorities summoned a 19-year old adherent, Jovidon Bobojonov, to the armed forces' enlistment office. On August 22, Bobojonov formally applied for alternative civilian service in lieu of military duty. On October 6, enlistment officers forcibly put him on a train to an assigned military unit. In response to a complaint by Bobojonov's parents, government and military authorities denied that Bobojonov had the right to claim conscientious objection, stating that although the law refers to the possibility of alternative service, no separate law establishing alternative service is in force. They said Bobojonov's refusal to serve was a crime and that the actions of enlistment officers were lawful. At year end, authorities confined Bobojonov to his military unit while he awaited trial.

The government adopted an antiterrorism law in 1999 that prohibits individuals from joining or participating in what it considers to be extremist organizations; authorities continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in or supporting such banned opposition groups. International NGOs said that a number of these organizations were considered to be potential political opponents of the government and in fact had never advocated or participated in acts of violence. The government's list of extremist organizations included the National Alliance of Tajikistan, 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). The NGO Freedom Now in July stated, "Individuals accused of being threats to national security, including members of religious movements and Islamist groups or parties, are at particular risk of arbitrary arrests, *incommunicado* detention, torture and other ill-treatment." The NGO Norwegian Helsinki Committee, in a June briefing to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated: "The IRPT represents a moderate political Islam..." Throughout the year, the government continued to assert that the IRPT had planned and/or executed multiple acts of terrorism starting in 2014. Press reported a May 20 prison riot resulted in the death of 32 persons, including 29 inmates and three guards. In the riot, MIA said, 17 members of ISIS, whose

organization claimed credit for starting the riot, and three members of IRPT were killed. In a statement, the IRPT said it held the government “fully responsible” for the violence. RFE/RL said the dead IRPT inmates included two prominent members of the party who were serving lengthy sentences that international NGOs and opposition figures described as politically motivated.

In October, RFE/RL reported the Supreme Court had sentenced the two sons of the founder of Jamaat Ansarullah, Amriddin Taborov, who had been extradited from Afghanistan, to 23 years and 16 years’ imprisonment on August 29. Authorities convicted the two men of organizing a criminal group, calling publicly for the overthrow of the state’s constitutional order, and possession of illegal weapons.

On September 21, authorities arrested Sadriddin Hauruddinovich Mulloyev, a member of Tabligh Jamaat, a Salafist movement banned by the government. Forum 18 reported that Mulloyev had returned to the country in February after several years abroad in response to a government amnesty program. In a video released by the government, Mulloyev renounced his membership in the group. After his arrest, prosecutors charged Mulloyev with calling for the overthrow of the government, membership in a criminal group, and “mercenary activity.” In October prosecutors asked Dushanbe’s Sino District Court to sentence Mulloyev to 18 years’ imprisonment. At year end, he remained in custody while awaiting trial.

In March Human Rights Watch (HRW) and eight other NGOs called for the immediate release of Muhammadali Hayit, formerly deputy head of the IRPT, whom the groups described as “seriously ill.” The Supreme Court found Hayit guilty of terrorism and extremism in 2016 and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Hayit told his wife in a March 9 visit that prison officials had beaten him for refusing to record a video denouncing Muhiddin Kabiri, IRPT’s leader living in exile. Hayit’s wife said he also suffered from kidney and liver problems and lived in a “tiny, dirty cell” with other prisoners. In September an NGO reported Hayit’s imprisonment continued.

In an RFE/RL blog interview with Qishloq Ovozi published on January 27, Kabiri denied the party was involved in the July 2018 killing of foreign tourists cycling in the country and said ISIS was responsible for the attack. In the interview, Kabiri said, “Under the guise of battling terrorism, [the government is]...carry[ing] out a genuine war on the opposition, and on those who think differently and those who do not agree with their policies.” He later stated, “ISIS and other extremist groups consider us [the IRPT] to be their ideological opponents, and we consider them as such.” In a July submission to the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC),

Freedom Now stated the government has used “laws such as the Law on Combatting Terrorism (1999)...to ban peaceful political opposition groups, such as the Islamic Renaissance Political Party of Tajikistan”. The government, however, continued to assert that the IRPT was a terrorist organization and that it received support from Iran.

On January 28, police searched the apartment of a Jehovah’s Witnesses family of four in Khujand, confiscating their cell phones and passports and interrogating them. The interrogations continued into the following day, with some sessions lasting up to 14 hours, while police threatened family members with imprisonment. One family member required hospitalization as a result of the detention. On April 2, MIA stated religious publications confiscated during a search of the family’s apartment contained were illegal. On June 18, police initiated a criminal investigation of two family members. The case remained unresolved at the end of the year.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that on January 19, police detained two female adherents for proselytizing. On April 4, authorities interrogated another member after some of his coworkers alleged that he had offended their religious feelings by talking to them about his faith.

Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government supported Ulema Council that prohibited women from praying at mosques. Ismaili Shia women were permitted to attend Shia services in Badakhshon and Dushanbe. In its third Universal Periodic Review of the government’s adherence to its commitments under the ICCPR, the UNHRC stated on August 22 it remained concerned “that interference by the State in religious affairs, worship, and freedom of religion and the ensuing restrictions... are incompatible with the Covenant.” UNHRC identified these restrictions as including: (a) interference with the appointment of imams and the content of their sermons; (b) control over books and other religious materials; (c) the requirement of state permission for receiving religious education abroad; (d) the prohibition against entering a mosque for those under 18 years of age; (e) the regulations regarding the registration of religious organizations; (f) the regulations on wearing clothes during traditional or religious celebrations and the prohibition of certain attire in practice, such as the hijab; and (g) restrictions imposed on Christian religious minorities, including Jehovah’s Witnesses.

During the year, the government invited the UN Special Rapporteur for religious freedom or belief to assess the government's actions as they pertain to religious

practice. At the end of the year, the UN Office of Special Rapporteur had not yet confirmed a date for the visit.

Officials continued to prevent members of minority religious groups from registering their groups as associations with the government, pursuant to the government's 2007 ban on their activities. In January the CRA reported 68 non-Islamic religious organizations had been permitted to register, but it provided no details on when those organizations were permitted to register.

According to Forum 18, a registered religious group member said CRA officials renewed demands to religious communities in January to provide the CRA with "information on the number of their members, finances, and activities." Officials also demonstrated particular interest in community finances, and whether children under the age of 10 attended meetings. Forum 18 stated officials acted as if there were no legal controls on their actions; accordingly, a religious community asked Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojaye, responsible within the CRA for non-Muslim communities, for a formal written request for the information he sought. Tukhtakhojaye stated he would not put anything in writing; "You must obey my verbal commands... [They] are the law, since I represent the law. If you don't obey my verbal commands you will be in trouble. We [the CRA] will come and seize any documents we want."

NGOs reported continued government restrictions on imam-khatibs and imams, such as centrally selecting and approving sermon topics, as well as prohibiting some imam-khatibs from performing certain ceremonies.

According to the Akhbor news agency, government officials in Nurobod District banned Friday prayers at a local mosque. They declared prayer would be allowed only after the district reached its military conscription target. On April 26, as district residents were preparing to pray, authorities ordered the worshippers to leave the mosque.

In a June submission to the UNHRC, HRW stated the government "severely curtails freedom of religion or belief, proscribing certain forms of dress, including the hijab for women and long beards for men." While there is no legal prohibition against wearing a hijab or a beard, NGOs reported authorities continued to enforce the ban on "nontraditional or alien" clothing. In a June submission to the UN, the NGOs Human Rights Vision Foundation, Eurasian Dialogue Institution, and the Tajik Freethinkers Forum said official media stigmatized and persecuted religious women, and that local police and ruling party activists organized surprise public

inspections of women wearing hijabs, requiring them to remove the headwear. The NGOs also said female patients wearing hijabs were refused treatment in public health clinics and faced restricted access or were denied entrance to educational establishments and administrative buildings. According to an Akhbor news agency report, a government protocol prohibits the import and sale of clothing “alien to national culture.”

Local women were permitted to cover their hair in a traditional Tajik-style head scarf known as a *Ruymol*, in which the scarf covers a woman's hair and is tied in the back.

In May a local news website showed security officials stopping and questioning women wearing the hijab on a street in Dushanbe. In December the press reported that Nilufar Rajabova accused Dushanbe police of insulting and threatening her after she was detained with some two dozen others in a raid targeting women wearing hijabs. On October 22, police in Dushanbe arrested a young woman and ultimately fined her 175 somoni (\$18) for refusing to remove a black-colored hijab. In January RFE/RL reported passport officials demanded young men return to their office without beards if they wanted a passport. RFE/RL stated many officials regarded beards as a foreign intrusion on local culture and a telltale sign of religious or other extremism.

In August Payom news portal reported the MIA instructed public transportation drivers to pick up women wearing hijabs along their routes around Dushanbe and take them to the MIA. Once the women were registered by the MIA, they were released.

Multiple sources continued to report on the conversion of mosques into other facilities. During a press conference on January 29, Chairman of Isfara City Sijouddin Salomzoda said that in 2018 the government closed 56 mosques in Isfara due to poor sanitation and lack of registration. According to Salomzoda, the government converted these mosques into social facilities, kindergartens, and medical clinics. He said there were 112 mosques, including one central Friday mosque, 11 Friday mosques, and 100 five-time prayer mosques functioning in Isfara.

In February Akhbor news agency reported 67 mosques were closed in Bobojon Ghafurov District due to poor sanitation and lack of registration. The mosques were also converted to social and cultural facilities. According to Akhbor news agency, there are 116 mosques, including one central Friday mosque, 16 Friday

mosques, 98 five-time prayer mosques, and one Christian church in the district. Akhbor also reported Chairman of Istaravshan City Bahrom Inoyatzoda said 12 mosques were closed in 2018.

On August 16, Akhbor reported authorities had converted the former Khoja Ansori madrassah in Khovaling District into a music school.

According to press, the government established a commission in February to assess whether the country needed new mosques or should reopen some of the mosques it had closed in recent years. On February 6, CRA Chairman Sulaymon Davlatzoda said the commission would submit its findings to the government, which would decide where mosques should be built or reopened. As of the end of the year, the commission had not submitted its findings. The press report also stated authorities had reopened dozens of mosques in recent months, including 100 in the southern district of Bokhtar.

The government continued to state it controlled the religious education of its citizens both domestically and abroad to prevent “illegal education, propaganda, and dissemination of extremist ideas, religious hatred, and enmity.” The government mandated that anyone wishing to study religion abroad should receive government approval and should study at a government-approved religious institution.

At a February 6 press conference, CRA Chairman Davlatzoda said 3,758 citizens had been illegally studying abroad at religious educational institutes. According to the CRA, 3,571 individuals returned from studies abroad over the past 10 years; 113 of them returned to their former places of education in the country and 54 persons returned to their studies abroad. Davlatzoda stated 241 citizens were studying illegally at religious institutions in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan. According to a December 14 report by RFE/RL, an estimated 3,400 students have returned from studying in foreign madrasahs since 2010, when the president demanded that parents bring their minor children home to prevent them from “becoming terrorists.” The report stated children who returned were required to undergo “readjustment” in local boarding schools and that authorities continued to monitor them long after returning to the country.

Rahmonali Rahimzoda, head of the enforcement branch of the Customs Service, stated to RFE/RL on February 14 that authorities had confiscated and burned 5,000 evangelical Christian calendars ordered by a state-registered Baptist church. Rahimzoda stated it was “illegal to bring religious literature” into the country

without the permission from the Ministry of Culture. The calendars included Bible verses. Authorities fined the church 400 somoni (\$41).

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 based on religious belief, due to fear of government harassment. Civil society representatives said discussion of religion in general, especially relations among members of various religious groups, remained a subject they avoided. Individuals said they were more comfortable discussing abuses of civil rights than discussing sectarian disagreements or restrictions on religious freedom.

On September 30, three women reportedly approached girls wearing hijabs in Dushanbe's Sino District, telling them that wearing a hijab is “alien to Tajik culture.”

Leaders of minority religious groups stated their communities enjoyed positive relationships with the majority Hanafi Sunni population, who, they said, did not hinder their worship services or cause concern for their congregations. Other minority religious group leaders stated that converts from Islam experienced social disapproval from friends and neighbors. Baha’i faith members said they continued to face discrimination from the general public.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with government and CRA officials several times throughout the year. On May 16, the Ambassador met with CRA officials to discuss policy restrictions and initiatives aimed at achieving greater religious freedom in the country. In meetings with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to raise concerns regarding 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 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 May 17, the Ambassador hosted an iftar attended by religious community leaders, civil society representatives, and government officials responsible for

policy on religious issues, including representatives from the CRA, Center for Islamic Studies, and the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights. Topics of discussion included the state of religious freedom in the country, local religious traditions, and the impact of government policies.

On May 30, embassy officers hosted an iftar attended by civil society representatives, government officials, international community representatives, and former participants in U.S. government exchange programs. Participants discussed religious freedom issues such as government restrictions on registration and religious attire. The group also discussed ways to raise these issues with the CRA and Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights.

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 December 26, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions as required in the important national interest of the United States.