

TAJIKISTAN 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right, individually or jointly with others, to adhere to any religion or to no religion, and to participate in religious customs and ceremonies. The constitution states, “Religious associations shall be separate from the state and shall not interfere in state affairs.” The law restricts Islamic prayer to specific locations, regulates the registration and location of mosques, and prohibits persons younger than 18 from participating in public religious activities. The government’s Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) maintains a broad mandate that includes approving registration of religious associations, construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature. The government continued to detain and prosecute Jehovah’s Witnesses for refusing to serve in the military. Starting January 20, a new law on military service permitted men to fulfill their military service obligation without serving on active duty by paying a fee and completing a one-month reserve training course, after which there was no commitment to be available for active duty. Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives said this new provision was not acceptable according to their faith because the alternative arrangement required participation in the military (through training) and payment of a fee to the Ministry of Defense, and did not allow for an exemption based on religious beliefs. On January 7, before the new law took effect, the Khujand Military Court sentenced Jehovah’s Witness Rustamjon Norov to three and a half years in prison for evading compulsory military service. According to the international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18, this was the longest known sentence to date in the country given to a conscientious objector. In accordance with a widespread prisoner amnesty, authorities released Norov from prison on September 21. Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to seek registration, an effort begun in 2007, and some adherents stated they were harassed by authorities. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government-supported Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying at those mosques. Government officials continued to take measures to prevent individuals from joining or participating in religious organizations identified by authorities as extremist and banned, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist organizations. According to NGOs, law enforcement agencies continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in, or of supporting, groups banned by the government, including groups that advocated for Islamic political goals and presented themselves as political opponents of the government. In April, the Supreme Court sentenced 119 individuals who were

arrested in 2020 for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood; their prison sentences ranged between five and 23 years. In August, the Minister of Internal Affairs said that in the first half of the year, law enforcement officials arrested 143 individuals on suspicion of participation in banned movements and organizations, terrorist groups, and extremist organizations. Authorities reportedly continued to discourage women from wearing hijabs. On December 23, a new article was added to the Criminal Code that criminalized providing “unapproved religious education,” including through the internet. In February, local officials in Mastchoh District destroyed the dome of a newly constructed mosque they said had not been approved by the CRA.

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 different religious groups, remained a subject they avoided.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials encouraged the government to adhere to its commitments to respect religious freedom. The Ambassador discussed freedom of religion and belief and advocated for imprisoned Jehovah’s Witnesses during his interactions with the government. Embassy officers raised concerns regarding the restrictions on participation of women and minors in religious services, restrictions on the religious education of youth, and the situation facing Jehovah’s Witnesses in the country. During the eighth U.S.-Tajikistan Annual Bilateral Consultations on July 1 in Washington, D.C., officials from the two countries discussed opportunities to advance religious freedom, and U. S. officials urged the government to ease religious restrictions and to free detained Jehovah’s Witnesses.

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 November 15, 2021, 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 9 million (midyear 2021). According to local academics, the country is more than 90 percent Muslim, of

whom the majority adheres to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Approximately 3-4 percent of Muslims are Ismaili Shia, the majority of whom reside in the Gorno-Badakhshon Autonomous Region (GBAO), located in the eastern part of the country.

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

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country a secular state and that "religious associations shall be separate from the state and shall not interfere in state affairs." 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. Since October 2007, the government has banned the Jehovah's Witnesses for carrying out religious activities contrary to the country's laws, such as refusing obligatory military service.

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

The law prohibits provoking religiously based hatred, enmity, or conflict as well as humiliating and harming the religious sentiments of other citizens.

The law defines extremism as the activities of individuals and organizations aimed at destabilization, subverting the constitutional order, or seizing power. This definition includes inciting religious hatred. In the case of noncriminal incitement of "social, racial, national, regional, or religious hatred," the Code of Administrative Violations provides for five to 10 days' administrative detention or a fine of 50 to 100 "fee units" (the value of which the government sets each year),

equal to 3,000 to 6,000 somoni (\$270 to \$530). The Criminal Code stipulates two to 12 years' imprisonment for a crime committed on the same basis, depending on the details of the case.

The law prohibits individuals from joining or participating in what it considers to be extremist organizations. The government maintains a list of "extremist organizations" that it says employ terrorist tactics in an effort to advance Islamist political goals, including the National Alliance of Tajikistan, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Qaida, the Islamic State of Iraq Syria (ISIS), Jabhat al-Nusra, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, Jamaat Tabligh, Islamic Group (Islamic Community of Pakistan), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Party of Turkestan (former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), Lashkar-e-Tayba, Tojikistoni Ozod, Sozmoni Tablighot, Jamaat Ansarullah, and the Salafist movement broadly.

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

The law defines a religious association as any group composed of persons who join for religious purposes. 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, and spreading religious beliefs. To register a religious association, a group of at least 10 persons older than 18 must obtain a certificate from local authorities confirming the adherents of their religious faith have lived in a particular local area for five years. The group must then submit to the CRA proof of the Tajik citizenship of its founders, along with their home addresses and dates of birth. The group must provide an account of its beliefs and religious practices and describe its attitudes related to education, family, and marriage. The group must specify in its charter the activities it plans to undertake, and once registered as a religious association, must report annually on its activities or face deregistration. According to the CRA, there are 4,058 religious associations registered in the country, 66 of which are non-Muslim, including the Russian Orthodox Church and the Baha'i Faith.

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

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

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

The law prescribes penalties for religious associations that engage in activities contrary to the purposes and objectives set out in their charters, and it assigns the CRA responsibility for issuing fines for such activities. The law imposes fines for carrying out religious activities without state registration or reregistration; violating provisions on organizing and conducting religious activities; 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 420 to 600 somoni (\$37 to \$53), heads of religious associations 1,200 to 1,800 somoni (\$110 to \$160), and registered religious associations, as legal entities, 6,000 to 12,000 somoni (\$530 to \$1,100). For repeat offenses within one year of an initial fine, penalties are increased to 720 to 1,200 somoni (\$64 to \$110) for individuals, 2,400 to 3,000 somoni (\$210 to \$270) for heads of religious associations, and 18,000 to 24,000 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.

The law allows restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion deemed necessary by the government to ensure the rights and freedoms of others, public

order, protection of the foundations of constitutional order, security of the state, defense of the country, public morals, public health, and the territorial integrity of the country. In addition, religious organizations annually must report general information about worship as well as organizational, educational, and outreach activities to the state.

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

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

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

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

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

areas with populations of 1,000 to 5,000. The law allows one “central Friday mosque” per district or city and makes other mosques subordinate to it.

Mosques function according to their charters in buildings constructed by government-approved religious organizations, by individual citizens, or with the assistance of the general population. The law states the selection of chief-khatibs (government-sanctioned prayer leaders at a central Friday mosque), imam-khatibs (government-sanctioned prayer leaders in a Friday mosque, who deliver a sermon at Friday noon prayers), and imams (government-sanctioned prayer leaders in five-time prayer mosques) shall take place in coordination with “the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs,” namely the CRA. Local authorities decide on land allocation for the construction of mosques in coordination with “the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs.” The CRA disseminates recommended talking points for Friday sermons drafted by the Islamic Center. Individual imam-khatibs may modify or supplement the talking points, and, according to the CRA, there is no penalty for noncompliance.

The law on traditions and celebrations regulates private celebrations, including weddings, funeral services, and observations of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday; sets limits on the number of guests for these events; and governs ceremonial gift presentations and other rituals, with the goal of preventing what the government considers exorbitant expenditures on such events. It also bans the traditional sacrifice of animals at ceremonies marking the seventh and 40th day after a death. Traditional sacrifices are permissible during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha. Separately, the freedom of conscience law states that group worship, religious traditions, and ceremonies must be carried out according to the procedures for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and peaceful processions. A June 2021 amendment to the law on traditions and celebrations gives the government authority to impose further restrictions on celebrations and ceremonies in the case of emergencies, including medical emergencies.

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

The freedom of conscience law allows registered religious organizations to produce, export, import, 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 Code allows government authorities to levy fines for the production, export, import, sale, or distribution of religious literature without CRA permission. According to the Code, violators are subject to confiscation of the given literature, as well as fines of 1,800 to 4,200 somoni (\$160 to \$370) for individuals, 3,000 to 9,000 somoni (\$270 to \$800) for government officials, and 6,000 to 18,000 somoni (\$530 to \$1,600) for legal entities, a category that includes all organizations. According to the Code, producing literature or material containing religious content without identifying the name of the religious organization producing it entails fines of 3,000 to 6,000 somoni (\$270 to \$530) and confiscation of the material.

The parental responsibility law prohibits individuals younger than 18 from participating in “public religious activities,” including attending worship services at public places of worship. Individuals younger than 18 may attend religious funerals and practice religion at home, under parental guidance. The statute allows individuals younger than 18 to participate in religious activities that are part of specific educational programs in authorized religious institutions.

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

According to the CRA, parents may teach religion to their children at home provided they express a desire to learn. While the freedom of conscience law allows parents to provide religious education to their children, it forbids religious associations from preaching or engaging in educational activity in private homes. The same law also restricts citizens from going abroad for religious education or establishing ties with religious organizations abroad without CRA consent. To be eligible to study religion abroad, students must complete a degree in religious studies domestically and receive written consent from the CRA. The Code stipulates fines of 3,000 to 6,000 somoni (\$270 to \$530) for violating these restrictions.

While the Ministry of Education sets classroom and curriculum standards and issues licenses for religious organizations, the CRA is responsible for monitoring the organizations to ensure implementation of the law's other provisions. Central district mosques may operate madrassahs, which are open only to high school graduates, but there are currently no madrassahs operating in the country because in practice, no madrassah has been able to meet the Ministry of Education's requirements relative to classrooms, qualified teachers, and curriculum. Other mosques, if registered with and licensed by the government, may provide part-time religious instruction for younger students in accordance with their charters.

The law requires men to serve one year in the armed forces if they have a university degree, and two years if they have not graduated from a university. Since January, men who want to fulfill their service commitment without serving the full one or two years on active duty may pay a fee and complete a one-month reserve training course.

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

Government Practices

On January 20, the Majlisi Namoyandagon (lower house of parliament) adopted the new Law on General Military Duty and Military Service, which allowed one-month reserve training instead of one- or two-year active-duty military commitments, upon payment of a fee. In August, a Ministry of Defense official told media the number of participants in the program would be capped each year by regional and local military commissariats (draft commissions). Applicants not selected in a given year would not be conscripted in that year but would be called up for an accelerated training program during the next conscription period according to a wait list. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tajiki language outlet Radio Ozodi reported that on July 30, President Emomali Rahmon signed into law regulations setting the fee to be paid to the Ministry of Defense in 2021 at 420 fee units, equal to 25,200 somoni (\$2,200). NGOs said the new law removed the text in the previous version that had allowed for alternative service only once the government specified what that service would be. Previous governments never enacted legislation determining acceptable alternative service, which allowed the government to punish those seeking alternative civilian service. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said the new law was not acceptable according to their faith because the alternative arrangement required participation in the military

(through training), required payment of a fee to the Ministry of Defense, and did not allow for an exemption based on religious beliefs.

On January 7, before the new law on military service went into effect, the Khujand Military Court sentenced Rustamjon Norov, a Jehovah's Witness, to three and a half years in prison for evading compulsory military service. According to Forum 18, this was the longest known sentence to date in the country given to a conscientious objector. A Jehovah's Witnesses representative said this lengthy sentence was meant to intimidate the group's members and to demonstrate the firmness of the government's position against the Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal to accept their military service obligation. Authorities arrested Norov in November 2020, and prosecutors accused him of falsifying his medical history to evade military service, which he denied. Norov offered to perform alternative civilian service. On September 21, Norov was freed under the annual nationwide amnesty law signed by President Rahmon.

According to Forum 18, Jehovah's Witness Shamil Khakimov continued to serve a four and a half-year sentence in a prison in Shughd Region that began in 2019 for "inciting religious hatred" after police found Jehovah's Witnesses literature and a Tajik-language Bible in his home. Khakimov's sentence was reduced by a year under the September amnesty, following a prior reduction of his original seven and a half-year sentence. Khakimov also faces a three-year ban on proselytizing once released from prison. Khakimov's relatives told Forum 18 that the 70-year old was in poor health, but that authorities denied requests, including from the UN Human Rights Committee, to transfer him to an outside hospital. Authorities also did not act on Khakimov's request for a presidential pardon during the year. On May 17, Khakimov told his lawyer that the prison administration wanted him to admit his guilt in writing; Khakimov refused. On June 30, the General Prosecutor's Office (PGO) forwarded his case to the Specialized Prosecutor's Office, which supervises prisons in Sughd Region. On July 1, the prison administration said Khakimov's petition for pardon was inapplicable because he did not repent his "crimes" or renounce his "extremist" beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness. In July, the Specialized Prosecutor's Office rejected Khakimov's petition for pardon because he refused to admit guilt, although an admission of guilt is not a legal requirement for pardon, and Khakimov's original offense (inciting religious hatred) had been removed from the Criminal Code in December 2020. On August 5, the Supreme Court denied Khakimov's appeal.

According to Radio Ozodi, on January 29, authorities released independent journalist Daler Sharifov from prison after he served his full one-year sentence.

Authorities charged him in 2020 with inciting religious hatred, based on articles and notes on human rights and religious freedom he wrote that a Shomansur district court determined contained extremist content and language that incited religious hatred.

According to NGOs, authorities continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in, or of supporting, banned extremist organizations. There were 339 such arrests during the year, according to Minister of Internal Affairs Ramazon Rahimzoda. At a press conference on August 4, he said that in the first half of the year, law enforcement authorities detained more than 140 persons on suspicion of participation in banned movements, organizations, and groups the government deemed to be terrorist and extremist. Of those detained, 45 were reportedly proponents of Salafism; 33 were members of banned opposition organizations, including IRPT, “Group 24,” and the National Alliance of Tajikistan; three were Muslim Brotherhood members; two were members of Jamaat Ansarullah; 26 were ISIS members; three were al-Qaeda members; eight were members of Jamaat Tabligh; six were members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir; and 18 were members of the Islamic Party of Turkestan.

On January 14, citing the PGO, state news outlet *Khovar* reported that the Tursunzoda City Court sentenced local resident Abdullo Haitov to five and a half years in prison for supporting and promoting Salafism. According to the PGO, Haitov studied Salafist teaching while working as a migrant laborer in Russia from 2010 to 2020. The PGO said he became an active Salafist and used social media to recruit others. Authorities had detained Haitov in February 2020 and charged him with extremism.

On February 12, Radio Ozodi said that the Ismoili Somoni District Court in Dushanbe sentenced Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov, a cleric widely considered to be the leader of the Salafist movement in the country, to five and a half years in prison for supporting Salafism. He had been in custody since November 2020. Abdurahmonov previously was arrested in 2009, sentenced to seven years in prison on charges of inciting religious hatred and released in 2013 under an amnesty.

In April, the Supreme Court issued a verdict in the high-profile case begun in July 2020 against a large group of individuals it said were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Independent news outlet *Asia-Plus* reported that the court sentenced 119 individuals, including Ismoil Qahhorov (from a prominent religious and political family) and two Egyptian citizens, to between five and 23 years in prison each. Radio Ozodi reported that the court found the suspects guilty of terrorist

financing, publicly calling for extremist activities, organizing an extremist community, and organizing activities of an extremist organization. The court also fined two additional defendants for “failure to report a crime.” According to *Asia-Plus*, the court identified Egyptian national Muhammad Bayumi, a professor at the Tajik National University, as the leader of the group and sentenced him to 23 years imprisonment. The second Egyptian citizen, an Arabic professor at the same university, received seven years in prison. The court sentenced Qahhorov to 15 years’ imprisonment.

On April 22, state news outlet *Khovar* reported that officials from the State Committee on National Security (GKNB) detained Abdulhaq Obidov, imam-khatib of a mosque in Shohmansur District of Dushanbe, along with four others on suspicion of membership in the banned Salafist movement. On June 22, Radio Ozodi reported that Obidov and two of those detained with him had been released. Some independent commentators said Obidov was arrested for making critical remarks, including of President Rahmon, at the funeral of prominent cleric Domullo Hikmatullo Tojikobodi. Publicly criticizing the President is a criminal offense.

Radio Ozodi reported that the Dushanbe City Court in late May sentenced Saidhasan Saidqiyomiddin, the son of Islamic cleric and opposition figure Saidqiyomiddin Ghozi, to 11 years in prison on unspecified charges in a trial held behind closed doors. Court representatives did not provide any details of the verdict, but Radio Ozodi reported that authorities accused him of extremism.

On June 2, Radio Ozodi reported that a court sentenced Mirzokul Hojimatov, also known as Mirzo Hojimuhammad, to five years’ imprisonment on charges of membership in a banned extremist organization. He formerly served as deputy head of the Sughd regional branch of the IRPT but voluntarily left its ranks in 2015, according to his relatives. Authorities reportedly arrested Hojimatov on May 22 after an investigation into an unspecified Facebook post by him.

On June 19, media reported GBAO authorities arrested prominent cleric Abdullobek Quvvatbekov, also known as Mavlavi Abdullo Yazgulomi, and his brother Izzatullo Quvvatbekov on June 18 at their home in Dushanbe and seized religious books and money. Radio Ozodi stated on June 30 that authorities released Izzatullo but extended Abdullobek’s detention and transferred him to a pretrial detention center. On September 17, Radio Ozodi reported that in September, the Khorugh city court sentenced Abdullobek to five years’ imprisonment for “calls to extremism through the internet.” The exact date of the

court ruling was not provided. According to Radio Ozodi, the Khorugh City Court also sentenced two of Abdullobek's students, Imomiddin Aliev and Nazriddin Shukurov, to four and a half years each on the same charges. Quvvatbek Quvvatbekov, Abdullobek's brother, told Radio Ozodi on September 17 that they would appeal the court ruling.

On July 1, the Bobojon Ghafurov District Court sentenced 18 individuals to prison, with sentences ranging from one to five and a half years, on charges of involvement in the Salafist movement. The Sughd Department of Internal Affairs arrested the 18 individuals in February. An unnamed lawyer told *Asia-Plus* news that Muhsin Kholmatov was sentenced to five and a half years for being the organizer of the group; 13 individuals received five-year sentences for extremism; another four received one-year sentences for failure to report or concealment of a crime.

On July 12, the Sughd Department of Internal Affairs reported that the Konibodom District Court sentenced five residents on charges of participating in the banned Salafist movement online, organizing illegal gatherings to promote ideas the government considered extremist, using literature with content considered extremist under the law, deliberately committing crimes against the constitutional order, and violating state security through their participation in the Salafist movement. Damir Sobirov, previously charged with the same Salafist-related offenses, was sentenced to six and a half years in prison, while Umar Ashurov, Sulton Ismoilov, Navruz Mavlonov, and Burkhon Tukhtaev were each sentenced to five years in prison.

On July 22, Radio Ozodi reported that a court in Kulob sentenced Mahmadsodik Saidov, imam-khatib at Nonvoyi Poyon Mosque in Kulob, to five years in prison for collaborating with the editor of banned website *Isloh.net*. Chair of the court Izatullo Tabarzoda told Radio Ozodi that Saidov repeatedly contacted the editor-in-chief of the website by mobile phone and sent him Friday sermons and information regarding the Kulob city leadership and the situation in the city. According to Tabarzoda, the court also sentenced Kulob residents Abdughaffor Rajabov and Aslamkhon Karimov to five years in prison on charges of cooperation with banned organizations, including *Isloh.net*. Editor-in-chief of *Isloh.net* Muhammadikbol Sadriddin denied he and Saidov were in contact and stated he received the sermons from another source. Forum 18 said in August that GKNB officers arrested Saidov in March after he refused to preach a CRA-provided sermon and preached his own sermon instead.

According to Radio Ozodi, on April 19, GKNB officers detained Asadullo Ismoilov, imam-khatib at a mosque in the Yakkachinor area of Dushanbe. Radio Ozodi reported that authorities visited Ismoilov's home and seized books and literature in April 20, and then released him from custody without charges on April 25.

Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government-supported Ulema Council in August 2004 that prohibited women from praying at mosques. Ismaili Shia women were permitted to attend Shia services in the GBAO and Dushanbe.

The CRA stated that during the year, it received one application for registration from a non-Islamic religious association, the synagogue in Dushanbe, which was approved. Authorities later deregistered the synagogue at the request of the Jewish community due to the small number of congregants, according to the CRA.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to seek registration, an effort at which they had been unsuccessful since 2007, and some adherents stated they were harassed by authorities.

At a press conference on July 26, Center for Strategic Studies (a government think tank) Director Khurshed Ziyoi said law enforcement authorities had gained substantial experience in the fight against terrorism and extremism and that the number of citizens in the ranks of such organizations was declining. However, according to Ziyoi, superstition, ignorance, and religious illiteracy in the country had become problems as dangerous as terrorism and extremism. He said there were people in the country who, hiding behind Islam, spread a false conception of religion among the population. He recalled an exchange with a bearded young man who said a mullah in his neighborhood told him that beardless men could not have children. Ziyoi said such mullahs "create more problems than terrorists and extremists."

NGOs reported continued government restrictions on imam-khatibs and imams, such as the central government selection and approval of sermon topics and the prohibition of some imam-khatibs from performing certain ceremonies.

In a November submission to the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), the international NGO Human Rights Watch 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 remained no legal prohibition

against wearing a hijab or a beard, NGOs reported authorities continued to discourage “nontraditional or alien” clothing and long beards.

On July 30, Forum 18 reported that efforts to prevent women from wearing hijabs intensified beginning in March, focused on women wearing hijabs on the streets, in markets, and in other public places. An unnamed source told Forum 18 that the source witnessed male police officers, along with female officials from an unknown state agency, stopping individual hijab-wearing women in the street in early July. The source reported witnessing male and female officials “speaking to women very rudely and harassing them if they refused to take off their hijab.” Women who insisted on wearing the hijab could not be employed in any state jobs or in private sector positions where they had to interact with the public, a human rights defender told Forum 18.

In a November 10 Facebook post, journalist Daler Imomali stated that authorities at the Hissor District passport office had refused to issue him new identification because he had a beard. Imomali subsequently contacted the Central Passport Service, which told him, he stated, that there was an informal, unpublished order banning beards in ID documents. In response to a press inquiry following Imomali’s allegations, the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated on November 11 that only citizens over 60 years of age had the right to obtain identity documents with a beard.

An anonymous woman told Forum 18 she was refused entry to a hospital by women stating they were from the government’s Committee for Women and Family Affairs; they told the woman that wearing the hijab was against the country’s morals and traditions. Hilolbi Qurbonzoda, chair of that committee, told Forum 18 in July that committee representatives were merely talking to women rather than giving them orders and that the country had its own national traditions and dress for women. According to Forum 18, Qurbonzoda said the hijab was not banned, and women could “easily” continue wearing it. In the same report, Forum 18 quoted unnamed sources that said in the past two years, the government did not appear to target bearded men as systemically as it targeted hijab-wearing women.

On February 10, CRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda said during a press conference that the CRA continued to carefully monitor all literature of a religious nature to prevent the proliferation of extremist views. According to Davlatzoda, any materials that contained public calls for abolition of the constitutional order or that supported terrorist activities would be deemed extremist. Davlatzoda further said the CRA was responsible for tracking and preventing the distribution of

publications produced by groups banned by the Supreme Court, including Jabhat al-Nusra, Hizb ut-Tahrir, ISIS, and Jamaat Ansarullah.

The government continued to mandate that anyone wishing to study religion abroad should receive government approval and should study at a government-approved religious institution.

On July 22, CRA chairman Davlatzoda said during a press conference that 3,916 citizens who had been illegally studying at religious educational institutions abroad had returned home to date, and 65 of them were pursuing their education in Tajikistan. He said 83 individuals were continuing illegal studies in religious educational institutions abroad and that “outreach and explanatory efforts” were underway to repatriate them.

During the July 22 press conference, Davlatzoda said that according to information available to CRA, no mosques had been shut down in the country between January and July. He further stated that mosques could be closed either pursuant to a court decision or a religious association’s decision that operation of a particular mosque was no longer necessary. The last report of mosque closures came in February 2019, when media reported that 67 mosques had been closed in Bobojon Ghafurov District, and that 12 had been closed in Istaravshan District in 2018. In those cases, the government cited poor sanitation and a lack of registration as reasons for the closures.

According to news site *Khabarho*, during a July 21 press conference, the public prosecutor of the Sughd Region, Furqat Khojazoda, expressed concerns about an increase in the number of cases of illegal religious education for youth in that region. He said that in the previous six months, law enforcement had uncovered 36 cases of illegal religious education there. All the offenders – teachers and parents of young people – were held accountable [likely fined], he said. During a press conference to sum up developments during the year, Internal Affairs Minister Rahimzoda said that one of the main reasons for persons joining terrorist extremist groups was illegal religious education received in religious institutions abroad. He expressed concern that there were still individuals receiving illegal religious education within the country as well. He noted that during the year, the government uncovered 80 domestic cases of illegal religious education and took legal action [levied fines] against the teachers and parents involved.

On October 4, the official website of the Majlisi Namoyandagon stated that the Majlisi was considering government-proposed amendments to the Criminal Code

that would criminalize providing “unapproved religious education,” including online, even if the educational material did not contain content deemed to be religiously extremist. Previously, providing such illegal religious education was an administrative offense. The amendments, which were incorporated into the Criminal Code on December 23, set the penalties at a fine of 51,200 to 76,800 somoni (\$4,500 to \$6,800) or imprisonment of up to three years.

Radio Ozodi reported in February that local officials in Mastchoh District destroyed the dome of a newly constructed mosque. Turob Turobov, chair of the Mastchoh *jamoat* (a small, rural administrative unit), told Radio Ozodi that the CRA had not approved construction of the mosque and that the structure was supposed to be turned into a library, in accordance with a 2018 decision by the Mastchoh District chair. Turobov also said there were already two mosques in the village.

In its 2019 review (the most recent) of the government’s adherence to its commitments under the ICCPR, which international observers stated remained accurate for 2021, the UNHRC said 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.” The 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 younger than 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.

A planned October visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to assess the government’s actions as they pertained to religious freedom did not take place. Neither the UN nor the government publicly commented on why the trip did not occur, and as of year’s end no new date had been proposed.

According to a February 1 post on the official Facebook page of the GBAO government, teaching of the ethics and enlightenment course to Ismaili Muslims was suspended “temporarily” in schools throughout the region. This subject had been taught in GBAO schools since the 1990s. Regional authorities said they based the suspension on the principle that public school curriculum should be broadly secular and not focused on any particular religious group; the growing number of

non-Ismaili children in the region's schools, especially in Khorugh; the lack of school hours and classrooms; and "other religious problems in the world today." According to GBAO authorities, the suspension provoked wide discussion among the local population and on social media. Regional governmental leaders convened relevant government officials and members of the Council of Ismaili Education and the Institute of Humanities at the Academy of Sciences to discuss the future of this course. Participants decided the subject should be excluded from the school curriculum and addressed at a more local level (in homes, other private buildings, and *jamoatkhonas* – Ismaili community centers that host both religious and cultural activities). The classes had not resumed at year's end.

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 different 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.

According to members of religious minority groups, Muslims who converted to non-Muslim religions usually faced social disapproval from family and relatives. In its annual report on the country, the NGO Open Doors said that converts from Islam remained at risk of retaliation from their families and friends, who viewed them as "traitors." Representatives of these minority groups, however, stated that in general, their communities had decent working relationships with majority Hanafi Sunni society. On social media, while open hostility toward minority religious groups was still relatively limited, there was significant criticism of Ismaili Shia Muslims and Zoroastrians. Traditional state and private media reportedly did not negatively portray or target minority religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

religious organizations, the provisions in the freedom of conscience law, and the requirements for religious organizations to report certain activities to the government. In March, the Ambassador discussed the state of religious freedom in the country in a call with the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

U.S. officials again emphasized with government representatives the importance of ameliorating restrictions on freedom of religion through national legislation as well as addressing alternatives to military service. U.S. embassy officers again sought amnesty for conscientious objectors and prisoners of conscience, and the Ambassador advocated for imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses during his interactions with the government.

During the eighth U.S.-Tajikistan Annual Bilateral Consultations on July 1 in Washington, D.C., officials from the two countries discussed opportunities to promote religious freedom. U.S. officials called for easing restrictions on religious literature; allowing children to attend religious services; registration of minority religious groups; and allowing Muslims who elect to do so to wear hijabs or beards. They also urged the release of Jehovah's Witnesses Shamil Khakimov and Rustamjon Norov.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with civil society and NGO representatives and Christian religious leaders during the year. Embassy officials continued to discuss with religious leaders how COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, including the closures of mosques and churches throughout the country at various times during the year, affected their communities.

Since 2016, Tajikistan has been designated a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On November 15, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and issued a waiver of the sanctions as required in the important national interest of the United States.