

TAJIKISTAN 2022 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.

Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to seek registration, an effort begun in 2007, and some adherents stated authorities harassed them. Jehovah’s Witnesses member Shamil Khakimov, imprisoned in 2019 for “inciting religious hatred” after police found Jehovah’s Witnesses literature and a Tajiki-language Bible in his home, continued to serve a four-and-a-half-year sentence. Khakimov’s health reportedly declined further during the year, according to Jehovah’s Witnesses sources. On September 7, the UN Human Rights Committee published a ruling that endorsed a complaint by the Religious Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Dushanbe (RAJW) that stated the government had violated their rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). According to the NGO Forum 18, CRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda announced to Protestant church leaders in May that the CRA would no longer register any new churches.

Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict issued by the government-supported Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying at those mosques. In September, authorities “temporarily” closed Dushanbe bookstores specializing in religious literature to review what they termed the “illegal import and sale of religious books.” The government reported law enforcement agencies continued to arrest and detain individuals suspected of membership in, or of supporting, groups banned by the government, including those that advocated for

Islamic political goals and presented themselves as political opponents of the government. In May, the government undertook what it called an “antiterrorist operation” in response to protests in the Gorno-Badakhshon Autonomous (GBAO) Region, which is populated by the ethnically and religiously distinct Pamiri minority. Authorities arrested protesters, activists, and journalists on charges that, for some, included extremism or collaboration with banned political groups. Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are closely linked, it is difficult to categorize these incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On August 4, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Tajiki-language outlet Radio Ozodi reported that the GBAO regional court sentenced Muzaffar Davlatmirov, a 58-year-old Ismaili cleric, to five years’ imprisonment “for public calls to extremist activities.” Forum 18 stated that with Davlatmirov’s imprisonment, the government had imprisoned at least seven prisoners of conscience for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Six were Muslim; one was a member of Jehovah’s Witnesses. A July 28 Eurasianet report detailed several actions authorities reportedly took to pressure Aga Khan-related humanitarian and development entities, which were associated with the Ismaili community and active in the GBAO region.

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 and State Department officials encouraged the government to adhere to its commitments to respect religious freedom. The Ambassador and embassy officers discussed freedom of religion and belief and advocated for an imprisoned member of Jehovah’s Witnesses during 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 annual bilateral consultations on May 25 in Dushanbe, U.S. officials raised concerns over the country’s implementation of its international obligations concerning freedom of

religion or belief. These included urging the government to ease religious restrictions, free an imprisoned member of Jehovah's Witnesses and follow through on its stated intention to invite the UN special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief to visit the country.

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 30, 2022, 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 9.1 million (midyear 2022). The government estimates the population to be slightly higher, at just more than 10 million. According to local academics, the country is more than 90 percent Muslim, of whom the majority adhere to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Approximately 3-4 percent of Muslims are Ismaili Shia, a majority of whom reside in the 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, members of 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 2007, the government has banned the

Jehovah's Witnesses religious group 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, calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order, or the organization of armed groups. The constitution prohibits "propaganda and agitation" that encourage 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 3,200 - 6,400 somoni (\$315 - \$630). 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-Qa'ida, 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, the political opposition movement Group 24, 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. This number is unchanged from 2021.

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; 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 960 - 1,280 somoni (\$95 - \$126)), heads of religious associations 2,560 - 3,840 somoni (\$252 - \$378)), and registered religious associations, as legal entities, 12,800 - 25,600 somoni (\$1,260 - \$2,500). For repeat offenses within one year of an initial fine, penalties are increased to 2,560 - 3,840 somoni (\$252 - \$378) for individuals, 6,400 - 7,680 somoni (\$630 - \$800) for heads of religious associations, and 32,000 - 38,400 somoni (\$3,000 - \$3,800) 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 must report general information about worship as well as organizational, educational, and outreach activities to the state annually.

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, the participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature.

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. 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 law does not contain a provision for alternate non-military service.

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 the government-approved topic for each Friday sermon, accompanied by recommended talking points 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. 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 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, sell, and distribute religious literature and other 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 of administrative violations 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 such literature, as well as fines of 3,840 - 6,400 somoni (\$378 - \$600) for individuals, 10,880 - 12,160 somoni (\$1,100 - \$1,200) for government officials, and 38,400 - 64,000 somoni (\$3,800 - \$6,300) for legal entities, a category that includes all organizations. Under the code, producing literature or material containing religious content without identifying the name of the religious organization producing it entails fines of 38,400 - 51,200 somoni (\$3,800 - \$5,000) and confiscation of the material; establishing an enterprise to produce religious literature or material for religious purposes, other than those established by registered religious associations, entails a fine of 51,200 somoni - 64,000 somoni (\$5,000 - \$6,300).

Under the freedom of conscience law, any person guilty of crimes “against sexual integrity,” terrorism, extremism, or other undefined “grave crimes,” cannot be the founder or a member of a religious association or appointed as an imam-khatib.

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 from 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 of administrative violations stipulates fines for violating these restrictions of 5,120 - 8,320 somoni (\$500 - \$820) for individuals, 7,680 - 9,600 somoni (\$760 - \$950) for employees and heads of religious associations or government officials, and 38,400 - 51,200 somoni (\$3,800 - \$5,000) for legal entities.

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 currently no madrassahs operate 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 criminalizes providing "unapproved religious education," including online, even if the educational material does not contain content deemed to be religiously extremist. The code of administrative violations stipulates fines of 5,760 - 9,600 somoni (\$570 - \$950) for individuals, 10,240 - 10,880 somoni (\$1,000 - 1,100) for employees and heads of religious associations, and 44,800 - 57,600 somoni (\$4,400 - \$5,700) for legal entities. The code also imposes a fine of 3,200 - 5,760 somoni (\$320 - \$570) on those receiving unapproved religious education.

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

Government Practices

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 Islamic political goals and presented themselves as political opponents of the government. Minister of Internal Affairs Ramazon Rahimzoda announced 365 arrests of suspected members of “extremist” and “terrorist” organizations in 2022, 26 more than in 2021. At a July 15 press conference, Prosecutor General Yusuf Rahmon said law enforcement authorities detected and registered 702 crimes related to extremism and terrorism in the first six months of 2022, 106 more than in the first half of 2021. Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize incidents as being solely based on religion.

Radio Ozodi reported law enforcement authorities detained 14 out of a total of 31 identified members of “terrorist and extremist organizations” during operations in Dushanbe in the first three months of the year. Of those identified, five were reportedly Islamic State militants; two members of the Salafi movement; 10 members of the Group 24; 12 IRPT members; and two members of Jamaat Ansarullah.

In mid-May, in response to protests in the GBAO, home to the ethnically and religiously distinct Pamiri minority, the government undertook what it called an “antiterrorist operation.” Authorities arrested at least 220 persons and charged 109 of them with crimes related to the protests. A subsequent crackdown on journalists and bloggers resulted in additional arrests. As of October, 77 individuals had been convicted, according to the Prosecutor General’s Office (PGO). Prosecutors charged some of those detained with extremism or collaboration with banned political groups such as the IRPT, a crime that carries a prison sentence of 10 to 18 years.

On August 4, Radio Ozodi reported that the GBAO regional court sentenced Muzaffar Davlatmirov, a 58-year-old Ismaili cleric, to five years’ imprisonment “for public calls to extremist activities.” Sources who spoke to Forum 18 and the Europe-based and opposition-affiliated Bomdod news agency assessed that Davlatmirov may have been jailed because he led the funeral ceremony of a GBAO community leader who was killed during protests in May. Authorities

arrested Davlatmirov in late July. According to an October 17 Forum 18 report, Davlatmirov's family and friends remained unaware of where he is serving his sentence. Forum 18 stated that with Davlatmirov's imprisonment, there were at least seven prisoners of conscience in the country imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Six were Muslim; one was a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Some individual social media users ascribed religious motivation to the events in the GBAO, where a majority of the ethnically Pamiri residents are adherents of the Shia Ismaili faith and consider the Aga Khan a spiritual leader. NGOs, analysts, and observers assessed the government crackdown as intended to stamp out political opposition and consolidate control over a restive region. In describing the government's actions, the NGO Human Rights Watch stated, "The residents of the isolated mountainous region are Pamiri, a distinct ethnic and religious minority, whom the government has long discriminated against." In an interview with the state-run news outlet *Khovar*, Center for Islamic Studies Director Abdurahim Kholiqzoda dismissed any connection between events in the GBAO and religion: "Those people who want to give events a religious connotation should know that they are doing a disservice to their religion, *madhhab* [school of Islamic jurisprudence], and nation, undermining foundations or power and authority of human religion and belief." He further emphasized that there is no conflict between Ismailis and Hanafi, who make up the majority population outside the GBAO.

A July 28 Eurasianet report detailed several actions authorities reportedly took to pressure Aga Khan-related humanitarian and development entities associated with the Ismaili community and active in the GBAO. Authorities canceled annual summer camps for youths funded by the Aga Khan Development Network. On August 18, Sharofat Mamadambarova, who had been associated with the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) since the mid-1990s and served as the first president of the Shia Imami Ismaili Council for Tajikistan, told Radio Ozodi that the State Committee for National Security summoned her for questioning about AKF activities in the country as well as about the May unrest and a few specific GBAO residents whom authorities had arrested.

Authorities in February detained Shohida Mahmadjonova, the mother of Sherzod Mahmadjonov, a blogger who lived in Germany and was known for his sharp

criticism of government policy concerning women wearing the hijab. The Ministry of Internal Affairs charged Shohida Mahmadjonova with extremism and collaboration with Group 24. The ministry referenced Sherzod Mahmadjonov in its statement charging his mother, specifying that he was “neither a blogger nor a member of the opposition, but rather is wanted for crimes of an extremist and terrorist nature.” Sherzod told Radio Ozodi in turn that individuals he believed to be affiliated with authorities informed him his mother could be released if he returned to the country to “repent” his actions. The district court in April sentenced Mahmadjonova to six years’ imprisonment on charges of extremism for supporting ideas of Group 24 and the IRPT in antigovernment comments posted on YouTube.

Jehovah’s Witnesses member Shamil Khakimov, imprisoned in 2019 for “inciting religious hatred” after police found Jehovah’s Witnesses literature and a Tajiki-language Bible in his home, continued to serve a four-and-a-half-year sentence. Khakimov’s health declined further during the year, according to information Jehovah’s Witnesses provided to Forum 18, despite prison authorities’ insistence that he received necessary medical care. Jehovah’s Witnesses said the 71-year-old was in danger of losing both legs; suffered from hypertension, with the risk of cardiovascular complications; and had begun to lose his eyesight. Khakimov was banned from proselytizing for three years after his release from prison, which was expected in May 2023 after authorities shortened his original seven-and-a-half-year sentence, already twice reduced, by another two years and three months in summer 2022. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, authorities denied numerous attempts to obtain early release or to ensure Khakimov received adequate medical treatment. The prison administration dismissed a motion filed in January for Khakimov’s early conditional release; an April motion for release on health grounds remained in legal limbo pending concurrence of a medical commission and revision of the complaint. In August, the European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses appealed to the Prime Minister of the country in his capacity as chair of the Pardon Commission, requesting a videoconference to assess Khakimov’s condition. It had not received a response as of year’s end. On November 2, following three closed hearings, the Khujand city court refused a petition for Khakimov’s temporary release for medical treatment. According to information Jehovah’s Witnesses provided to Forum 18, Khakimov testified about the state of his health during a hearing held October 27. The court denied his application along with a separate petition for an independent medical examination.

Jehovah's Witnesses representatives continued to object to the provision in the law regarding military service, saying that it violated their beliefs because the alternative arrangement available under the statute 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.

CRA Chair Davlatzoda publicly confirmed the official registration of 49 central Friday mosques, 327 Friday mosques, 3,612 five-time prayer mosques, 66 non-Islamic religious associations, one Islamic center, and three jamoatkhonas (Ismaili community centers that host both religious and cultural activities) in the country, for a total of 4,058 religious associations. These numbers remained unchanged from 2021, as CRA did not register any new religious associations in 2022.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to seek registration, an effort they began in 2007. Some members of the community stated authorities harassed them. On June 28, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 the ban imposed in 2007 "severely restricted" their freedom of religion and belief. International delegations of Jehovah's Witnesses made regular attempts to meet with local authorities but said authorities rejected the proposals and refused to engage in dialogue. According to Forum 18, in 2021 and 2022 the Sughd Regional Department for Combatting Organized Crime repeatedly questioned several members of Jehovah's Witnesses regarding Shamil Khakimov. Khurshed Raupov, deputy chief of this department, confirmed to Forum 18 that police had questioned members of Jehovah's Witnesses but declined to discuss the reasons.

On September 7, the UN Human Rights Committee published a ruling ("views adopted by the committee") that endorsed a complaint filed by the Religious Association of Jehovah's Witnesses in Dushanbe (RAJW) stating the government had violated Jehovah Witnesses' rights under the ICCPR. The committee found that none of the explanations offered by the government justified its decision to ban Jehovah's Witnesses and to refuse re-registration to the RAJW, which limited the rights under the ICCPR allowing individuals "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" as well as the rights of RAJW members for freedom of association. According to the committee, this led to "arrests, detentions, interrogations, searches, beatings, seizures of religious materials, as well as deportation of Jehovah's Witnesses." The committee stated that the government, as signatory to the ICCPR, is "under an obligation to provide [RAJW]

with an effective remedy” and is “required to make full reparation” to those whose rights under the ICCPR have been violated. The committee asked the government to provide, within 180 days, information about the measures it is taking to comply with the ruling and requested that the government publish the ruling and disseminate it widely in the Tajiki language. According to the ruling, the government is obligated to take all necessary steps to prevent similar violations in the future.

According to Forum 18 and the NGO Open Doors, CRA Chair Davlatzoda summoned leaders of Protestant churches to a meeting in late May and told them the CRA would no longer register any new churches. Unnamed members of various Protestant churches said Davlatzoda also “openly warned us that under-18-year-olds cannot have freedom of religion or belief or participate in church activity and that no religious camps are allowed for them.” The CRA denied several churches’ requests for registration, an unnamed Protestant told Forum 18.

According to Forum 18, in August, the CRA sent questionnaires to non-Muslim religious communities requiring details about all community members and their families and information on all financial support received from foreign individuals or organizations. The government asked the religious communities to provide their members’ date and place of birth, home and work address, marital status, full details of educational and employment history, and passport information as well as similar details for family members. The CRA began to impose this annual requirement after the passage of the Religion Law in 2018. Sources told Forum 18 that mosques were not required by the CRA to complete questionnaires. Members of communities receiving the questionnaires told Forum 18 that they regarded the government’s questions to be a violation of their freedom of religion and belief, as well as of their right to privacy.

An unnamed Protestant told Forum 18 that authorities fined a group of Protestants in the Sughd region in January for “exercising religion without official approval”. Another unnamed Protestant told Forum 18 they met for worship without registration and feared authorities could punish them at any time, adding that they knew of up to 15 such Protestant groups that were not registered but wanted to be. A third Protestant estimated the figure at 20. Members of a Baptist church told Forum 18 they had a small community in Dushanbe that met

regularly for worship, but that church members outside the city could not actively share their faith due to stricter control in rural areas.

On October 24, Forum 18 reported that the government continued “to implement its existing restrictions on Muslims exercising their freedom of religion or belief.” In a February 24 speech, President Rahmon reportedly stated, in a passage subsequently omitted from the published version of the speech, “People must come to mosques only for prayer and leave after the prayer. A mosque must not be a place for gatherings and discussions.”

On January 22, a security official questioned a Jehovah’s Witnesses family in Istaravshan, in the Sughd region, about a new group of Jehovah’s Witnesses reportedly forming in the region. When the head of the family replied that he had no information about the matter, the official said he would continue his investigation.

In May, police detained and questioned a member of Jehovah’s Witnesses after she spoke about her beliefs with a man by telephone. During questioning, police said that they had obtained her call records and asked her about the reasons for her calls. The authorities said that they would question all the individuals with whom she had been in contact. No further information on the case was available.

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. During a February 8 press conference, in response to a question from media outlet *Sputnik Tajikistan* about some imam-khatibs reading sermons without explaining them or even making mistakes in reciting them, CRA Chair Davlatzoda said that this was due to the poor quality of candidates for imam-khatib positions and a lack of effort by individual imam-khatibs.

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.

While there was no legal prohibition against wearing a hijab or a beard, NGOs reported authorities continued to discourage “nontraditional or alien” clothing and long beards. According to Forum 18, governmental targeting of women wearing hijabs continued, but human rights defenders and Muslims deemed such cases at present to be isolated and not large-scale. On November 17, Radio Ozodi reported that police officers and unknown individuals had been checking the identity documents of some men with beards and women wearing hijabs at the eastern and southern entrances to Dushanbe. An Ozodi reporter spoke with a woman conducting the checks, who said the purpose was to promote the country’s national culture and combat the influence of traditions and customs “alien to Tajiks.” The Ministry of Internal Affairs, Committee for Women and Family Affairs, and Committee on Religion all denied involvement in the checks.

On July 1, Radio Ozodi reported police officers detained and beat 60-year-old Elobat Oghalikova, who had attended festive events on National Unity Day, June 27. Oghalikova said police officers prevented her from entering a local cultural center; the officers stated the black clothing she was wearing to mark her son’s death was inappropriate for the event’s celebratory atmosphere. The officers reportedly forced her into a vehicle and took her to a police station. She reported losing consciousness after being struck while in the car and said she was further beaten at the police station, where she was held for seven hours. The Spitamen District Department of Internal Affairs confirmed Oghalikova’s detention but denied that she was beaten. They confirmed that there was an administrative case against her for disobeying the lawful demand of a police officer. Oghalikova stated that after she and her other son made formal complaints, police threatened both with 15 days’ imprisonment.

Authorities continued to monitor all literature of a religious nature. CRA Chair Davlatzoda stated at a July 25 press conference that the CRA’s Department for Religious Analysis reviewed 247 sets of material submitted for religious examination in the first half of the year, approving 95 and denying 152. Among the approved items were 1,261 items of religious literature (92.8 percent of the 1,359 texts examined). The CRA denied approval of 98 items of religious literature, 1,746 leaflets, 127 CDs, 11 mobile phones, and a flash drive. Davlatzoda did not provide any details on the reviewed items or explain the CRA’s objections to any of the unapproved materials.

On September 2, Radio Ozodi reported that authorities closed bookstores specializing in religious literature located near the central mosque in Dushanbe. CRA Spokesman Afshin Muqim told independent news outlet *Asia-Plus* on September 7 that authorities acted in response to the illegal import and sale of religious books and copyright violations. Muqim added that Tajik law mandates all religious books undergo expert review before import and sale and said the closure was temporary while the CRA reviewed the books. Muqim also stated that a publisher of Islamic literature was closed for violating authors' rights following a complaint alleging the unauthorized reproduction and sale of a text. The bookstores had reopened by year's end.

At the beginning of 2022, customs authorities in the Khatlon Region seized an estimated 5,200 copies of the Quran entering the country from Afghanistan by truck at the Panji Poyon border checkpoint. On July 22, Radio Ozodi confirmed that customs authorities sent the books back to Afghanistan. Commenting on the matter at a July 25 press conference, CRA Chair Davlatzoda stated that in accordance with existing legislation, all religious literature must undergo a religious examination before being imported into the country. In this case, the books had not been submitted to the CRA for review. He added that conditions in the country allowed for publishing high quality copies of the Quran and that there was no need to import it from other countries.

In October, Forum 18 reported that Linguatech, a center for the translation of religious texts into Tajiki that has worked on a translation of the Bible, remained open, despite previous questioning by authorities.

Authorities continued to require that anyone wishing to study religion abroad receive government approval and do so at a government-approved religious institution. According to Forum 18, in a February speech, President Rahmon called for "serious measures against religious education without state permission," which the government has banned, including closing all madrassahs. Rahmon stated, "The number of cases of illegal religious education [had] increased...[leading] to serious consequences," and he added that individuals had been punished for "teaching religion to 1,662 teenagers in 367 cases." During his July 25 press conference, CRA Chair Davlatzoda stated that 78 citizens were involved in illegal study at religious educational institutions abroad in the first half of 2022.

On September 6, Radio Ozodi reported authorities suspended the activities of the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB), which oversees religious education for Ismaili community members in the GBAO. Three unnamed sources in Khorugh, including an ITREB teacher, noted that authorities launched inspections after the May unrest in the GBAO. As a result, religious education in jamoatkhonas stopped, and authorities reportedly continued to occasionally summon teachers for questioning. Authorities denied that the Ismaili educational organization had been closed, saying its activities were under review. An unnamed member of the GBAO Jamoatkhona Development Center in Khorugh told Radio Ozodi that a CRA working group reviewed its activities in August but had not yet reached any conclusions.

On August 4, the press center of the PGO reported that Abdurahmoni Jomi District Court fined Mahmadullo Abdizoda, a local resident, 640 somoni (\$63) for “illegal religious teaching.” Nasriddin Halimov, a resident of the same district and the father of a nine-year-old and an 11-year-old, was fined 192 somoni (\$19) for allowing his children to obtain illegal religious education from Abdizoda.

On September 8, Radio Ozodi reported Vahdat prison authorities placed Zubaydullohi Roziq, a former member of the banned IRPT, in a punishment cell for 15 days for providing illegal religious education. An unnamed source at Vahdat prison told Radio Ozodi that despite repeated warnings, Roziq continued to teach the basics of sharia to one of his young cellmates using religious books. The source added that authorities told Roziq he could perform prayer, but that religious education in prison was illegal. Hisomiddini Zubaidullo, Roziq’s son, told Radio Ozodi his father was a clergyman who quoted the Quran in ordinary conversation.

A planned 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 by year’s end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Individuals outside government continued to express reluctance 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.

According to members of religious minority groups, Muslims who converted to non-Muslim religions usually faced social disapproval from family and relatives. In its *2022 World Watch List* report on the country, Open Doors reported that converts from Islam remained at risk of retaliation from family, friends, and community; the phenomenon was more pronounced in rural areas than in cities. Representatives of minority groups stated that, in general, their communities had good relationships with majority Hanafi Sunni society. On social media, while open hostility toward minority religious groups remained 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.

On February 15, Dushanbe's city-level Department of Internal Affairs arrested and sentenced a 25-year-old man to 15 days in jail for hooliganism for insulting and threatening Abduqodir Talbakov, a journalist and director of the Lohuti library, a well-known public library in Dushanbe. Talbakov told Radio Ozodi that a man with a covered face had approached him and shouted, "Hey Zoroastrian... You will answer in front of us, including for insulting the mullah." According to Talbakov, this was the fifth time he had been threatened.

On October 6, well-known cleric and imam-khatib of the Kulob city central Friday mosque, Mullo [Mullah] Haydar Sharifzoda, reported having been attacked with a stun gun the previous week during a funeral prayer. The Kulob Department of Internal Affairs reported that the identity of the attacker had been established and that he suffered from a mental disorder. It did not confirm whether a criminal case would be opened as a result of the attack. Sharifzoda told Radio Ozodi that he was not seriously hurt and had forgiven the individual.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings throughout the year with the Foreign Minister, Deputy Foreign Minister, CRA and PGO officials, 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. During an August visit to Khorugh, the Ambassador called on the Ismaili Center to demonstrate U.S. respect for religious freedom.

U.S. officials 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 prisoners of conscience. The embassy advocated for imprisoned Shamil Khakimov, raising his deteriorating health with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the PGO in August. The embassy issued a statement to Radio Ozodi in November calling on authorities to release Khakimov and grant him access to medical treatment.

During annual bilateral consultations on May 25 in Dushanbe, U.S. officials articulated several concrete steps needed and discussed opportunities to promote religious freedom with government counterparts. U.S. officials encouraged progress on the adoption of a law providing for alternative military service for conscientious objectors; pressed for Shamil Khakimov's release; and expressed hope the government would follow through on its intention to invite the UN special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief to visit the country.

In July, U.S. officials discussed religious freedom issues with representatives of the country's embassy in Washington, D.C. U.S. officials noted to the embassy's deputy chief of mission that religious freedom designations would be made by the Secretary of State near the end of the year and urged progress on the steps outlined in bilateral discussions earlier in the year. They underscored that allowing citizens to peacefully practice their religion and granting children access to religious education are powerful tools in countering extremist ideology and blunting recruitment efforts by religious extremists.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with civil society and NGO representatives and Christian religious leaders during the year. At the end of Ramadan, the embassy hosted an iftar attended by representatives of various religious communities, civil society, and government officials responsible for

policy on religious issues, including representatives of the CRA. Embassy officials engaged in wide-ranging discussions on the state of religious freedom and human rights in the country and the impact of government policies on religion.

Since 2016, the country 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 30, 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.