



Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **97.3%**
- Agnostics : **1.4%**
- Others : **1.3%**

8,669,000

143,100 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Tajik constitution, approved in 1994 and amended in 2003, recognises the right to freedom of conscience. Article 26 states: “Everyone has the right to independently determine his (her) relationship toward religion, to profess any religion individually or together with others.”^[1] However, the law on religion, which came into force in 2009, has taken steps against religious freedom, for example by making registration compulsory for religious groups and banning unregistered activity, private religious education and proselytising. The law also imposed strict limits on the number and size of mosques and gave the state power to appoint imams and define the content of Friday sermons. It also imposed strict state censorship on the content, publication and importation of religious materials. Other legal obstacles to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief were introduced later, with amendments to the Civil and Penal Codes, with the law on parental liability. This bans young people under 18 from taking part in religious activities, except for funerals. Another legal obstacle is the law on extremism, which has often been used to justify coercive actions against forms of Islam not sanctioned by the state.^[2]

The government views with suspicion foreign influence, especially if it concerns Islam. By contrast, the authorities have sought to promote Tajik traditions. On 28th August 2017, amendments to the law on traditions, rites and celebrations came into effect, requiring Tajiks to wear national garments and follow the national culture. Many women have been stopped and their names registered – more than 8,000 in August 2017 alone – for wearing an Islamic veil. Other government steps to discourage women from wearing the veil include sending text messages to citizens on their private phones or shutting down shops that do not sell traditional Tajik garments.^[3] In August 2017 lawmakers approved a bill that tightens regulations regarding private ceremonies in an effort to curb ostentatious weddings. The new law bans people from wearing black at funerals and establishes rules to stop lamentations regarded as excessive.^[4]

The minimum age for the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca was raised in 2017 from 35 to 40 years.^[5]

In May 2016, restrictions on the number of terms President Rahmon is permitted to run were lifted and religious political parties were banned.^[6]

Incidents

In late July 2017, Bakhrom Kholmatov, a pastor with the Korean Protestant Sonmin Sonbogym Church in Khujand, in the northern Sogd region, was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of inciting religious hatred by singing hymns deemed to be extremist.^[7] Kholmatov had been arrested on 10th April 2017 after a raid on his church. Law enforcement officers also swooped on other small Protestant congregations.

In Konibodom, a religious community was forcibly closed. Several of its members were pressured into renouncing their faith and, in some cases, they lost their jobs.

In Dushanbe, government officials closed two kindergartens, one because it had a book containing Christmas carols, and the other because two of its employees were Protestants.^[8]

In the capital, the secret police on 11th June 2017 broke up a Sunday service of the Council of Baptist churches, seizing religious material.

On 29th October, the authorities raided the River of Life Protestant Church and fined one of the people present for having the printout of an article taken from a Russian website.

In April 2017 a Protestant was fined, his computer and religious material seized after he offered someone a Bible in Tajik.^[9]

On 6th March 2016, police broke into a private home where Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting. They interrogated the 30 people present for more than six hours. Two months later, police stormed another Jehovah's Witnesses meeting, fining two of those present for illegal possession of religious material.^[10] On 13th October 2017, a Jehovah's witness called Daniil Islamov was sentenced to six months in jail by the military court in Qurghonteppa for refusing to do compulsory military service.^[11]

The government has used the spectre of extremism to control various Islamic religious practices, based on the premise that anything outside the bounds set by the state threatens the country's stability. In the past two years, mass arrests and trials have taken place involving dozens of people allegedly linked to extremist Islamic groups. Many religious activists who broke state rules, including some 20 imam-khatibs, were jailed after being accused of being Salafists, members of the Muslim Brotherhood or Hizb ut Tahrir.^[12] There were many arrests and convictions, especially in Sogd and the capital, with average prison sentences of five years.

The 2016 convictions of members of the outlawed Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) of Tajikistan raised serious international concerns about the worsening domestic situation and fears the crackdown might help "to radicalise those pushed out of [the] public debate."^[13] The trials ended in two party members getting life in prison, 11 getting 14 to 28 years,^[14] two defence lawyers getting 20 years^[15] for defending party representatives, as well as frequent and brutal acts of intimidation against IRPT members and their families.

In an effort to limit all foreign influence, all imams trained abroad without the approval of Tajik authorities were replaced in November 2017 with more "amenable" clerics. Many students who attended Islamic schools abroad were forced to return^[16] even though the country's last six madrassahs were closed in 2016.^[17]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Tajikistan, Central Asia's poorest post-Soviet state, has been led by Emomali Rahmon since 1992 without any respect for civil liberties or religious and political freedom. Lately, repression of all forms of dissent has increased, with many acts of retaliation and intimidation against opponents and their families, drastically weakening freedom of expression. Although this is not directly related to a specific desire to curb freedom of religious belief, it is inevitable that the government's growing intent to eliminate all forms of opposition will have negative repercussions on all expressions of religiosity outside the strict bounds set by the state.

Endnotes / Sources

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