



## Tajikistan

### International Religious Freedom Report 2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Government policies reflect a concern about Muslim extremism, a concern shared by much of the general population. The Government monitors the activities of religious institutions to keep them from becoming overtly political. Members of the organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Emancipation), an extremist Islamic organization, were subject to arrest and imprisonment for subversion. During the period covered by this report, northern regional authorities closed three mosques. The Government, including President Imomali Rahmonov, continued to enunciate a policy of active secularism, which it tends to define in antiextremist rather than nonreligious terms.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some religious minority groups continued to experience local harassment during the period covered by this report. Some mainstream Muslim leaders occasionally expressed concern through sermons and press articles that minority religious groups undermine national unity.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy has promoted a message of tolerance not only between, but also within, faiths through public diplomacy efforts. In addition the Ambassador meets regularly with community leaders of different confessions.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 55,300 square miles, and its population is approximately 6.8 million. An estimated 95 percent of citizens consider themselves Muslims, although the degree of religious observance varies widely. An estimated 30 to 40 percent of the rural population and 5 to 10 percent of the urban population regularly follow Muslim practices (such as daily prayer and dietary restrictions) or attend services at mosques. The number of Muslims who fast during the holy month of Ramadan is high; up to 99 percent of Muslims in the countryside and 70 percent in the cities fasted during the latest month of Ramadan. Approximately 7 percent of all Muslims are Shi'a, 40 percent of whom are Ismailis. Most of them reside in the remote Gorno-Badakhshan region as well as certain districts of the southern Khatlon region and in Dushanbe. Most other Muslim inhabitants (approximately 90 percent) are Sunni.

There are approximately 230,000 Christians, mostly ethnic Russians and other Soviet-era immigrant groups. The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox, but there also are registered organizations of Baptists (five), Roman Catholics (two), Seventh-day Adventists (one), Korean Protestants (two), Jehovah's Witnesses (one), and Lutherans (no data on registered organizations). Other religious minorities are very small and include Baha'is (four registered organizations), Zoroastrians (no data on registered organizations), Hare Krishna (one registered organization), and Jews (one registered organization). Each of these groups is estimated to total less than 1 percent of the population. There are no accurate data on atheists in the country, but it is estimated that 0.01 percent of the population is atheist or does not belong to any confession. The overwhelming majority of these groups live in

the capital or other large cities.

Christian missionaries from Western countries, Korea, India, and other countries are present, but their numbers are quite small. The number of Christian converts since independence is estimated to be approximately 2,000 persons. Some small groups of Islamic missionaries from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states also visited the country during the period covered by this report. One U.S. Muslim organization began working in Khujand and Dushanbe during this reporting period.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions, and the Government monitors the activities of religious institutions to keep them from becoming overtly political. Members of the extremist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir were subject to arrest and imprisonment for subversion.

Although there is no official state religion, the Government has declared two Islamic holidays, Id Al-Fitr and Idi Qurbon, as state holidays.

According to the Law on Religion and Religious Organizations, religious communities must be registered by the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA), which is under the Council of Ministers and monitors the activities of Muslim groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, and other religious establishments. While the official reason given to justify registration is to ensure that religious groups act in accordance with the law, the practical purpose is to ensure that they do not become overtly political. To register with the SCRA, a national religious group must submit a charter, a list of at least 10 members, and evidence of local government approval of the location of a house of worship, if one exists. Religious groups are not required to have a physical structure in order to register, but they cannot hold regular meetings without one. Individual believers--up to 10 persons--do not have to register with the SCRA in order to worship privately.

Responsibility for registration of neighborhood mosques is divided between the SCRA and local authorities, who must agree on the physical location of a given mosque. The SCRA is the primary authority for registration of non-Muslim groups; however, these religious groups must also register with local authorities. According to the SCRA, local authorities may object to the registration of a place of worship only if the proposed structure is not in accordance with sanitation or building codes, located on public land, or immediately adjacent to government buildings, schools, or other places of worship. If the local government objects to a proposal, it is required to suggest an alternative. In the absence of registration, local authorities can force the closure of a place of worship and members can be administratively fined. There were no cases of SCRA refusal to register religious groups during the period covered by this report nor were there reports of groups that did not apply for registration out of a belief that it would not be granted. However, there were isolated cases of local government refusal to register religious groups in their areas, as well as closures of unregistered mosques.

The Council of Islamic Scholars, technically a nongovernmental body, governs Islamic theology and education in the country and approves appointments of imams and imam-khatibs; however, the Council's charter and membership are subject to SCRA approval. Some prominent religious figures reportedly have voiced disapproval with the quality of religious education implemented by the Council.

Approximately 2,500 mosques are registered for daily prayers. So-called "Friday mosques" (large facilities built for Friday prayers) must be registered with the SCRA. There are 213 such mosques registered, not including Ismaili places of worship because complete data were unavailable. Only one such mosque is authorized per 15,000 residents in a given geographic area. Many observers contend that this is discriminatory because no such rule exists for other faiths.

During the period covered by this report, President Rahmonov strongly defended "secularism,"

which in the country's political context is a politicized term that carries the strong connotation--likely understood both by the President and his audience--of being "antiextremist" rather than "nonreligious." In national speeches, the President cautioned against outsiders unfairly linking Islam to terrorism. While the vast majority of citizens consider themselves Muslims and are not anti-Islamic, there is a significant fear of Islamic extremism, both in the government and among the population at large.

A 1999 constitutional amendment stated that the State is secular and that citizens may be members of political parties formed on a religious basis, although a 1998 law specifying that parties may not receive support from religious institutions remained in effect. Two representatives from a religiously oriented party, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT), were members in the Lower House of the National Parliament during the period covered by this report. There also were several deputies from the Islamic Renaissance Party in regional and district parliaments around the country. The IRPT was incorporated into the Government at the end of the Civil War and is the only legal Islamic political party in Central Asia.

There are small private publishers that publish Islamic materials without serious problems. There is no restriction on the distribution or possession of the Koran, the Bible, or other religious works. The IRPT continued to publish its official newspaper, "Najot" (founded in 1999). The party also publishes "Naison," a magazine for women, and "Safinai Umed," a journal targeting youth. All of these publications are printed at a private press because state-run publishing houses refuse to print IRPT materials, apparently for political reasons. The Union of Islamic Scientists of Tajikistan publishes the weekly journal "Tamaddun." Privately owned mass-circulation newspapers regularly published articles explaining Islamic beliefs and practices.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Government did not explicitly ban, prohibit, or discourage specific religions; however, local authorities in some cases used the registration requirement in attempt to prevent the activity of some groups. The Government has banned the activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which has developed a significant following among the ethnic Uzbek population in the north, with signs of an increased following among Tajiks in and around Dushanbe as well as in the Kulyob area of the southern Khatlon oblast. This movement operates underground and calls for a nonviolent overthrow of secular governments and the establishment of a theocratic, borderless, Islamic Caliphate.

Beginning in August 2002, the Government required all mosques to reregister with local authorities and the SCRA. Approximately 750 mosques were closed for failing to comply with this requirement during 2002, although many remained open as "teahouses" or other public facilities where observant Muslims go to talk and pray. The Government is no longer actively pursuing a registration campaign, so mosque closures have declined. In August and September 2002, authorities in the northern Sughd region closed a number of unregistered mosques in the districts of Isfara and Jabbarasulov. Most of these mosques registered with the Government and were officially reopened; eight remained "closed," although congregants continued to pray there. During Ramadan in 2002, city authorities in Dushanbe informed several "teahouses" that they would need to register as mosques; officials did not restrict activities at these teahouses while the registration applications were pending.

In July and August 2002, government officials in Sughd oblast first carried out an "attestation" of all imams in the region, through which all imams were tested on their knowledge of Islamic teachings and religious principles. Although the test was designed by the Council of Islamic Scholars, technically a nongovernmental body, it was approved by the SCRA, which enforced the results of the test. As a result, 15 imams were removed from their posts; 3 of the imams were members of the IRPT and were removed for that reason. Local observers alleged that the Government used the testing process as a means to silence certain politically outspoken religious figures. In Sughd oblast, mosques that registered allegedly signed an agreement declaring, "I will use our organization only for religious ends. I will not be a member of a party, and will not assist them." This agreement has proven to be sufficient for the Government; no additional attestation took place during the period covered by this report.

There were reports that some local officials have forbidden members of the Islamic Renaissance Party to speak in mosques in their region. However, this restriction is more a reflection of political rather than religious differences.

There have been reports that in some cases, local government officials have forbidden Muslim women from having their photograph taken for an internal identification document while wearing the hijab. The SCRA claims that this occurs rarely, and that they have interceded with the identification agencies in each case to make an exception. Reportedly, this is attributable to overzealous interpretation of the statement that "Tajikistan is a secular country."

In May 2003, local authorities in Tursunzade, a city just outside of the capital Dushanbe, dispersed a Jehovah's Witnesses gathering in one parishioner's apartment for violation of the religion law's provisions on registration and private religious education. The judge in the case fined the owner of the apartment \$17 (50 somoni) and issued an order banning any gathering of more than two Jehovah's Witnesses in the city unless they registered the apartment as a place of worship with the Tursunzade city government and the SCRA. The court case seems to have been resolved quietly, with no further appeals. The Jehovah's Witnesses are working with the local and national authorities to register their apartment. In November 2002, a Baptist was tried in a northern region and fined \$8 (25 somoni) after his neighbors complained that he was holding evangelical services in the courtyard of his home. He filed an appeal, but according to the central Baptist church, he has since left the country.

Missionaries of registered religious groups legally were not restricted and proselytized openly. Missionaries are not particularly welcomed by local communities, and some religious groups experienced harassment in response to evangelical activities. The Government's concern about Islamic extremists prompted it to restrict visas for Muslim missionaries. There was evidence of an unofficial ban on foreign missionaries who were perceived as Islamic extremists.

An executive decree generally prohibits Government publishing houses from publishing anything in Arabic script, but they have done so in special cases. They generally do not publish religious literature, but have done so on occasion, including copies of the Koran using Arabic script. The "ban" on printing in Arabic script is thought to be an attempt to prevent the publication of extremist literature, such as flyers circulated by Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The Government continued restrictions on pilgrims undertaking the hajj during the period covered by this report, mandating that pilgrims travel by air. The Government stated that it made the decision because no tour operators in the country could meet Saudi government safety and hygiene regulations for buses carrying pilgrims and to ensure that the instability in Iraq would not put pilgrims at risk. There were no quotas on the total number or regional origin of pilgrims. A total of 5,000 citizens made the pilgrimage (out of a Saudi-imposed limit of 5,900), which was an increase of 2,000 compared with the previous hajj. This increase is likely due to an increase in air connections and a general improvement in the country's economic situation.

Authorities in Isfara continued to impose restrictions on private Arabic language schools (to include restrictions on private Islamic instruction) stemming from past reports that one such school was hosting a suspected terrorist. In addition restrictions on home-based Islamic instruction remained in place. While these restrictions were reportedly due to political concerns, they affected religious instruction.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

The Government continued to detain and try on charges of subversion numerous members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the northern, primarily ethnic Uzbek, Sughd region, as well as increasing numbers of ethnic Tajiks in and around Dushanbe and in Khatlon Oblast, particularly around Kulyob. These measures primarily were a reaction to the group's political agenda of overthrowing the Government with a theocratic Islamic Caliphate. Although Hizb ut-Tahrir asserts that it intends to accomplish this by nonviolence, officials are concerned by its alleged links to terrorist organizations, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). According to press reports, approximately 45 Hizb ut-Tahrir members were arrested during the period covered by this report. Most of these persons were

sentenced to between 1 and 4 years' imprisonment, but some received sentences of up to 18 years' imprisonment. There were reports of serious irregularities in trials and abuse in detention of Hizb ut-Tahrir members, although such reports were also common in other legal proceedings.

During the period covered by this report, both the Dushanbe Synagogue and the Grace Sunmin Church experienced administrative difficulties with the city government. The synagogue is located in a section of the city slated for urban renewal, and the community has been asked to leave the location. The U.S. Ambassador intervened several times. He emphasized to government officials the importance the U.S. places on the issue, and he was able to obtain credible assurance that a compromise would be reached. The city authorities and the Jewish congregation have apparently agreed on a new location. Grace Sunmin church bought a building at a discounted price under their designation as a "labor collective." The city authorities sued for repayment of the 30 percent discount based on the price of the building after the Grace Sunmin church performed renovations; however, the city lost its court case. While these cases may initially appear to be religiously motivated, it has been determined that both are cases of bureaucratic, rather than ideological, problems.

There were reports that authorities subjected members of Islamic institutions and the political opposition to increasing pressure during the period of this report. In May 2003, the Government arrested Shamsiddin Shamsiddinov, the IRPT's Deputy Chairman for Cultural Affairs, and charged him with murder and other "grave crimes," according to press statements by the national Military Prosecutor's office. In mid-January, he was sentenced to 16 years in prison. The IRPT stated that it believed these arrests were motivated politically as efforts to discredit the IRPT, but it did not allege that this was part of any government campaign against religion.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### *Abuses by Terrorist Organizations*

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

#### *Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom*

Officials suspended prohibitions against the use of loudspeakers for the daily call to prayer in Dushanbe and certain areas of the Khatlon and Sughd regions. These prohibitions were issued by the mayors' offices in each area in 2001, but were apparently not based on any central directive.

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Conflict between different religious groups virtually is unknown, in part because there are so few non-Muslims. However, some Muslim leaders occasionally expressed concern that minority religious groups undermine national unity and complained that current laws and regulations give preference to religious minorities. While most citizens consider themselves Muslim and most of the inhabitants are not anti-Islamic, there is a pervasive fear of Islamic extremism among both the government and the general population.

In January, a Baptist missionary was killed in his church in Isfara. A police investigation uncovered two suspects, one of whom fled the country. The other was arrested, but not been tried at the end of the period covered by this report.

In May 2003, fires occurred in at least two mosques and the homes of two imams in the Isfara district in the northern region. Responsibility for these acts was unclear, although local authorities reportedly instructed one of the imams to tell any inquiring journalists that the fire in his house was

due to an electrical short circuit. The Sughd regional fire department said in a press statement that an arson investigation was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

In November 2003, unknown individuals scattered pages torn from the Koran along the streets of the village of Chorkuh, a village known for a high concentration of devout Muslims. The motivation is unclear, with some speculating that it was an attempt to spark Muslim hatred for other religions. There was no known backlash.

The small Baha'i community generally did not experience prejudice; however, two Baha'i residents of Dushanbe were shot and killed in 2001. A police investigation determined that both men were killed because of their religion. In fall 2002, the Government arrested approximately 40 persons in connection with these killings; in November 2002, the Government formally charged 3 of these individuals with the murders, 1 of whom also was charged with the 1999 murder of a leader of Dushanbe's Baha'i community. Police alleged that the suspects killed the three men because of their religion and that they were aligned with Iran. During the period covered by this report, all three were sentenced to prison for the murders.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Through public diplomacy, the U.S. Embassy has supported programs designed to create a better understanding of how democracies address the issue of secularism and religious freedom.

The Embassy also has investigated actively allegations of religious abuse by the city government, observing judicial processes for Grace Sunmin Church and facilitating meetings between the head of the Jewish community and the city government.

The Ambassador hosted an Iftar dinner for prominent Islamic figures and scholars. The overriding message was that of promoting religious tolerance, not only between religions but also within.

To ensure community support for the Embassy's development programs, USAID conducted a "Mullahs on the Bus" tour of some of its program sites. This tour ensured that shapers of Islamic opinion were familiar with all U.S. development programs and could see the positive results achieved by U.S. assistance.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35488.htm)