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U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Tajikistan

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TAJIKISTAN

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and neither the law nor the Government places restrictions on religious worship. However, according to the Law on Religion and Religious Organizations, the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers registers religious communities and monitors the activities of Muslim groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, and possibly 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 overly political. In 1997 the Council of the Islamic Center was subordinated to the Government Committee on Religious Affairs. This move took place quietly, and with no apparent objection from the observant Muslim community.

An estimated 95 percent of the citizens, about 5,515,000, consider themselves to be Muslims, although the degree of religious observance varies widely. Only an estimated 10 percent regularly follow Muslim practices (such as daily prayer and dietary restrictions) or attend services at mosques. About 3 percent of all Muslims are Ismailis; almost all reside in the remote Gorno-Badakhshan region. The rest of the Muslim population is Sunni. There are 3,082 registered mosques in the country, but this does not include Ismaili places of worship because complete data were unavailable. There is no religion-based conflict between these two groups. There are approximately 235,000 Christians, mostly consisting of ethnic Russians and other Soviet-era immigrant groups. The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox, but there are also Baptists (five registered organizations), Roman Catholics (two registered organizations), Seventh-Day Adventists (one registered organization), Korean Protestants (one registered organization), Lutherans (no data on registration), and Jehovah's Witnesses (one registered organization). Other religious minorities are very small and include Baha'is (four registered organizations), Zoroastrians (no data on registered organizations), Hare Krishnas (one registered organization), and Jews (one registered organization). There is also a small number of declared atheists. Each of these groups probably totals less than 1 percent of the general population. The overwhelming majority of them live in the capital or other large cities.

Regularly throughout the period covered by this report President Imomali Rahmonov aggressively defended secularism, which in the Tajik political context is a highly

politicized term that carries the strong connotation--likely understood both by the President and his audience--of "antireligious" rather than "nonreligious." The President also occasionally criticized Islam as a political threat. While the vast majority of citizens, including members of the Government, consider themselves Muslims and are not anti-Islamic, there is a pervasive fear of Islamic fundamentalism among both progovernment forces and much of the population at large.

On May 23, 1998, Parliament passed a law prohibiting the creation of political parties with a religious orientation. The United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the largest component of which is the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), along with international organizations and foreign governments, strongly criticized the law for violating the June 1997 peace agreement, which included a government commitment to lift the ban on member parties of the UTO. The post-independence 1992-97 civil war was fought in part over differing views of the role of religion in the republic. On June 2, 1998, President Rahmonov established a Special Conciliation Commission to resolve the dispute. On June 18, the Commission reported that it had devised compromise language for the law, banning parties from receiving support from religious institutions. A new version of the law including the compromise language was passed in the November 1998 parliamentary session. A draft constitutional change, to be voted on in a September 26 referendum, states that the State is secular and also that citizens can be members of parties formed on a religious basis.

Missionaries are not restricted legally and proselytize openly. There were no reports of harassment, but neither are missionaries particularly welcomed. Christian missionaries from Western nations, Korea, India, and other countries are present, but their numbers are quite small. Current estimates put the number of recent Christian converts at approximately 2,000. However, the Government's fear of Islamic terrorists prompts it to restrict visas for Muslim missionaries. In 1998 a group of pro-Taliban missionaries, who had entered the country illegally, appeared at a few mosques; they were deported within days. Aside from this case, there was other evidence of an unofficial ban on foreign missionaries who are perceived as Islamic fundamentalists.

Aside from the registration requirement, there are few official constraints on religious practice, but government officials sometimes issue extrajudicial restrictions. For example, the mayor of Dushanbe prohibited mosques from using microphones for the five-times-daily call to prayer. There are also reports that some local officials have forbidden members of the Islamic Revival Party from speaking in mosques in their region. However, this restriction is more a reflection of political rather than religious differences. In Isfara, following allegations that a private Arabic language school was hosting a suspected Uzbek terrorist, the authorities imposed restrictions on private Arabic language schools (to include restrictions on private Islamic instruction). These restrictions appear to be based on political concerns, but the effect on private religious instruction is also clear.

Although there is no official state religion, the Government has declared two Islamic holidays, Id Al'fitr and Idi Qurban, as state holidays.

There were government-imposed restrictions on the number of pilgrims allowed to go on the Hajj in 1998. Individuals were not permitted to travel in a personal vehicle; persons were required to travel by government-owned transportation, primarily buses. There were regional quotas on the number of pilgrims, which led to corruption as places were sold.

Government publishing houses are prohibited from publishing anything in Arabic script; they do not publish religious literature. However, in the first half of 1998, the President initiated a project to publish a Tajik version of the Koran in both Cyrillic and Arabic script. The books were printed in Iran and sold through the Iranian bookshop in Dushanbe. 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.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period

covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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

On July 28, 1998, an unknown group near Dushanbe kidnaped the imam of the central mosque, Mullo Giyomiddin. His body was found some days later. There have been no developments in the case. His successor, Mullo Khudoiberdi, was kidnaped on September 3, 1998, but was released after a few days. There have been no arrests in the case. Motives behind these crimes are unclear.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Conflict between different religious groups is virtually unknown, in part because there are so few non-Muslims. However, Muslim leaders occasionally have expressed concern that minority religious groups undermine national unity. Conservative Muslims in rural areas have physically harassed non-Muslim women for not wearing traditional attire.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of the promotion of human rights.

Embassy officers held bilateral meetings with government officials on the Political Party Law, particularly concerning the prohibition of political parties organized on a religious basis, effectively coordinating the efforts of these officials with those of other concerned states.

Using U.S. Information Service programs, the Embassy has supported programs designed to create a better understanding of how democracies address the issue of secularism and religious freedom. Several participants in these programs are key members of the opposition who now, through their writings and their debate on the definition of secularism, reflect a more sophisticated understanding of the concept and how secularism and religious activism can coexist in a free society.

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