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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Tajikistan

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000

TAJIKISTAN

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.

There was no change in the overall status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. However, a national referendum in September 1999 amended the Constitution to legalize religiously oriented political parties, and two representatives of one such party were elected to Parliament. Legal action was initiated against one evangelical Christian congregation that for many years has declined to register with the Government.

The Government continues to pursue an aggressive policy of secularism, which it tends to define in antireligious rather than nonreligious terms. Government policies reflect a pervasive fear of Islamic fundamentalism, a fear shared by much of the general population.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

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. According to the Law on Religion and Religious Organizations, religious communities must be registered by the Committee on Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers, which 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.

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 being "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 constitutional amendment passed in a September 26, 1999 referendum, states that the State is secular and that citizens can be members of parties formed on a religious basis. Two representatives from a religiously oriented party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, now sit in the lower house of the national Parliament.

Religious Demography

An estimated 95 percent of the citizens, about 5,550,000 persons, 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 more than 4,000 registered mosques open for daily prayers. (An exact figure was not available from the State Committee on Religion. The number appears to have risen significantly in comparison to the previous figure of 3,082 only because of a government effort to force existing mosques to register and thus pay registration fees.) In addition there are 237 so-called "Friday mosques" (which are large facilities built for Friday prayers) registered with the State Committee on Religion. These figures do not include Ismaili places of worship because complete data were unavailable. There is no religious conflict between these two groups. There are approximately 230,000 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).

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.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Missionaries of registered religious groups are not restricted legally and proselytize openly. There were no reports of harassment of such groups, 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 persons. However, the Government's fear of Islamic terrorists prompts it to restrict visas for Muslim missionaries. There was 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 5-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.

The Government arrested numerous members of the Islamist organization, Hizb Ut-Tahrir (Party of Emancipation) in the northern, primarily ethnic Uzbek, Leninobod district. According to a press account, over 50 of the Hizb Ut-Tahrir organization's members were arrested between January and April 2000. At least two of the detainees reportedly were charged with disseminating subversive literature and planning to overthrow the Government. This organization is linked with an organization of the same name in Uzbekistan which calls for the creation of a Muslim caliphate in the country and has become a target of repression by the Uzbek Government, which has accused its members of acting against the constitutional order and of belonging to an extremist group.

An unregistered Baptist congregation in Dushanbe was informed in early 2000 that it was obliged to register with the Government, but the Baptists refused on the grounds that they are a branch of the larger All-Baptist Churches, an organization of Baptist churches from throughout the former Soviet Union. They argued that only their leadership in Moscow has the right to register with a government authority. Proceedings began against the Baptists in March 2000 and the court fined the congregation a little more than 50 cents (1,000 Tajik rubles). The congregation refuses to pay as a matter of principle. There have been some instances of petty harassment of the church, with the militia on at least one occasion taking down the sign outside the congregation's building.

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

There were government-imposed restrictions on the number of pilgrims allowed to go on the Hajj in 1999. 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. The motivation for quotas and other restrictions appears to be profit (maximizing bribes from Hajj pilgrims), rather than discouraging a religious practice.

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. The Islamic Renaissance Party, a religiously oriented party, began publishing Najot, a weekly newspaper, in 1999. Privately owned mass-circulation newspapers regularly published articles explaining Islamic beliefs and practices.

There was no change in the overall status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. However, a national referendum in September 1999 amended the Constitution to permit religiously oriented political parties, and two representatives of one such party were elected to Parliament.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Conflict between different religious groups is virtually unknown, in part because there are so few non-Muslims. However, some Muslim leaders occasionally have expressed concern that minority religious groups undermine national unity.

There were no reports that conservative Muslims in rural areas physically harassed non-Muslim women for not wearing traditional attire during the period covered by this report.

The small Baha'i community normally does not experience prejudice, but a prominent 88-year-old member of the community was killed in his home in Dushanbe in September 1999. Members of the Baha'i community believe that he was killed because of his religion, since none of his personal possessions were taken from the murder scene. Police have made no arrests, but militant Islamists aligned with Iran are considered likely perpetrators.

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 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.

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. Several participants in these programs are key members of the opposition who now, through their writings and their debate on the definition of secularism, reveal a more sophisticated understanding of the concept and of how secularism and religious activism can coexist in a free society.

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