



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Tajikistan

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some areas of concern.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Government policies reflected a concern about Islamic 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. There were no closures of officially registered mosques during the period covered by this report, although the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) announced that a number of unregistered mosques were operating and closed several unregistered mosques and prayer rooms. The SCRA removed two imams from their mosque positions. Local governments used the registration process to hinder some organizations' religious activity. The Government, including President Emomali Rahmonov, continued to enunciate a policy of active secularism, which it tended to define in antiextremist rather than in religious terms.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some minority religious groups continued to experience local harassment. Some mainstream Muslim leaders occasionally expressed, through sermons and press articles, their opinion 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 among, but also within, religious groups through public diplomacy efforts. In addition, embassy staff, including the ambassador, meet regularly with community leaders of different confessions. Embassy staff investigate instances of potential discrimination and advocate strongly for government tolerance of all religious groups. The embassy worked with international organizations to assist religious minorities and organized special events to promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 55,300 square miles and a population of approximately 7.3 million, although it was difficult to determine an accurate figure due to absence of birth registrations in some rural areas. An estimated 97 percent of citizens considered themselves Muslims, although the degree of religious observance varied widely. Overall, active observance of Islam appeared to be increasing. An estimated 30 to 40 percent of the rural population and 5 to 10 percent of urban residents regularly followed Muslim practices or attended services at mosques. The vast majority of Muslim inhabitants (approximately 90 percent of the population) were Sunni. Approximately 7 percent of Muslims were Shi'a, 40 percent of whom were Ismailis. Most Ismailis resided in the remote eastern Gorno-Badakhshan region as well as certain districts of the southern Khatlon region and in Dushanbe, the capital. In 2006 a new unregistered Islamic group of the Salafi sect began worshipping in Friday mosques in Dushanbe, Sughd, and Khatlon. Between one and two thousand Salafis practiced in Dushanbe. Other Muslims and the Government were tolerant of their activity.

There were eighty-four non-Muslim groups registered with the SCRA. Approximately 230 thousand Christians, mostly ethnic Russians and other Soviet-era immigrant groups, resided in the country. The largest Christian group was Russian Orthodox, but other registered organizations included Baptists (five organizations), Roman Catholics (two), Seventh-day Adventists (one), Korean Protestants, which included the SunMin Church (two), Jehovah's Witnesses (one), and Lutherans (no data available). Other religious minorities were very small and included Baha'is (four registered organizations), Zoroastrians (no data available), Hare Krishnas (one), and Jews (one). Each of these groups was estimated to total less than 1 percent of the population, and nearly all of their members lived in Dushanbe or other large cities. An estimated 0.01 percent of the population was atheist or did not belong to any religious denomination.

Christian missionaries from western countries, Korea, India, and elsewhere were present in small numbers. The SCRA estimated the number of Christian converts since independence at up to three thousand 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.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, the Government monitors the activities of religious institutions to keep them from becoming overtly political or espousing "extremist tendencies," and some local administrative offices misinterpret the term "secular state" as involving a bias against religion.

The extremist Islamist political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned, and its members are subject to arrest and imprisonment for subversion.

Although there is no official state religion, the Government recognizes two Islamic holy days, Eid Al-Fitr and Idi Qurbon (Eid al-Adha in Arabic), as state holidays.

According to the Law on Religion and Religious Organizations, religious communities must be registered by the SCRA, which is under the council of ministers and monitors the activities of all religious establishments. While the official justification for 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 ten 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 ten 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, such groups must also register their place of worship with local officials. According to the SCRA, local authorities may object to the registration of a place of worship only if the proposed structure does not meet sanitation or building codes, or if it is located on public land or immediately adjacent to government buildings, schools, or other places of worship. If the local government objects to a proposal, the religious community requesting permission 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 fined administratively.

There were no cases of the SCRA permanently denying registration to religious groups during the period covered by this report. There were no reports of groups declining to apply for registration out of a belief that it would not be granted; however, the SCRA rejected several applications on technical grounds, stalling registration. There were isolated cases of local government refusal to register religious groups in their areas, such as in the city of Tursonzade, where the SCRA demanded local registration for a branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses in addition to their national registration.

The country has 2,885 registered mosques for daily prayers. So-called "Friday mosques" (larger facilities built for weekly Friday prayers) must be explicitly registered with the SCRA. There are 238 such mosques registered, not including Ismaili places of worship. Only one such mosque is authorized per fifteen thousand residents in a given geographic area. Many observers contend that this is discriminatory because no such rule exists for other religious groups.

There are eighteen madrassahs, twenty Islamic colleges, and one Islamic university. Private religious schools are permitted and must be registered. Parents are allowed to homeschool their children; however, parents are not allowed to teach others' children in their home in a group setting.

During the period covered by this report, President Rahmonov continued to strongly defend "secularism," a politicized term that carries the strong connotation 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 Muslim, there is a significant fear of Islamic extremism, both in the Government and among the population at large.

A 1999 constitutional amendment permits religiously based political parties, 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 of Tajikistan (IRPT), were members in the lower house of the national parliament during the period covered by this report. There also were fourteen deputies from the IRPT in district parliaments around the country. The Government incorporated the IRPT in 1997 at the end of the civil war. It is the only legal Islamic political party in Central Asia.

An executive decree generally prohibits government publishing houses from publishing anything in Arabic script; however, some have done so in special cases without government interference if they presented the material for review prior to printing. They generally do not publish religious literature but have done so on occasion, including producing copies of the Qur'an. There is no restriction on the distribution or possession of the Qur'an, the Bible, or other religious works. There were no reported restrictions on the religious-oriented press.

In January 2006 the SCRA introduced a new draft law on religion entitled, "On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations," intending to replace the current law on religion. The draft would add restrictions to the existing law, such as increasing the number of worshippers required to form a mosque, forbidding children under the age of seven to study religion, and prohibiting religious associations from participating in political activities. The draft was distributed domestically for review but had not been sent to parliament by the end of the reporting period.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Official government policy contributed generally to the free practice of religion, but local governments sometimes misapplied this policy. The Government did not explicitly prohibit or discourage specific religious groups. Although the SCRA did not refuse any group registration during the period of this report, it declined to accept some applications, citing missing documentation or other technicalities. Some religious groups, unable to register, claimed the excuses were false and were a way to deny registration. Local authorities in some cases used the registration requirement to prevent activities by some groups. During the period covered by this report, local authorities detained and fined representatives of a religious group for organizing because it was not registered at the local level, even though it was registered with the national SCRA. Eventually the representatives were released.

Although the SCRA reported it did not close any registered mosques or praying rooms during this reporting period, it stated that twenty-six unregistered mosques operated in the Sughd, Khatlon, and Gorno-Badakhshan regions. Unconfirmed reports stated that authorities closed down several unregistered prayer groups. The Government was no longer actively pursuing a registration campaign, but it continued to close unregistered mosques and praying rooms.

In 2004 the local government of Tursonzade used administrative barriers to prevent the registration of a place of worship for the Jehovah's Witnesses, in spite of its national registration. The SCRA intervened on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses, but the city administration had not registered the group by the end of the period covered by this report.

The SCRA controlled participation in the Hajj and imposed further restrictions on pilgrims ("hajjis") undertaking the pilgrimage during the period covered by this report. The Government continued to require air travel for the Hajj and controlled local tour operators, citing hygiene and safety concerns as reasons for limiting other means of travel. Hajjis are required to register with the SCRA and deposit \$2,300 (7590 Tajik Somoni) prior to departure. Each local district "unofficially" had a quota for hajjis, and government officials registering them were known to take bribes. As a result, 3,450 citizens participated in the Hajj in 2006, indicating a steady decrease from 4,072 in 2005 and approximately 5,000 in 2004.

The Government continued to carry out "attestations" of imams, through which all imams were tested on their knowledge of Islamic teachings and religious principles. Imams could be dismissed if they did not "pass" the test. On April 3, 2006, the Government organized a seminar for Imam-Khatibs of Friday mosques in Dushanbe to teach them about the various sects of Islam. The Government also issued a textbook to schools in May 2005 on the history of Islam. Observers interpreted such government-imposed instruction as a way of controlling religious indoctrination.

In 2004 the Government allegedly used the Council of Ulamo, an ostensibly nongovernmental body that monitors and standardizes Islamic teaching, to hand down a fatwa prohibiting women from praying in mosques. This was considered by some to be a political move under the guise of religious law to reduce the access women have to IRPT messages. Some local officials forbade members of the IRPT to speak in local mosques; however, this restriction reflected political rather than religious differences.

There were unconfirmed reports that in some cases local government officials prohibited Muslim women from having their photographs taken for an internal identification document while wearing the hijab, a Muslim head covering. The SCRA claimed that this occurred rarely and that it interceded with the identification agencies in each case to make an exception. Reportedly, this was attributable to overzealous interpretation of what it meant to be a secular country. In 2004 officials refused to issue passports to approximately one hundred women in Isfara who did not want to be photographed without a hijab. According to press reports, the minister of education announced on October 19, 2005, that girls were not permitted to wear hijabs in public educational institutions. Some school officials then expelled girls who wore hijabs to school; however, the SCRA claimed that this was neither official law nor policy.

In the fall of 2005 international organizations reported that government militia positioned themselves outside of some mosques to restrict children from entering; however, no militia were seen guarding mosque entrances after January 2006. This action was taken after government officials declared children should be studying in schools, not in mosques, during the day. Citizens spoke out against militia guarding the mosques, prompting their removal.

Missionaries of registered religious groups are not restricted by law, and they continued to proselytize openly. Missionaries are not particularly welcomed by some local communities, and some religious groups experienced harassment in response to their evangelical activities. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of visa restrictions for Muslim missionaries.

In June 2005 city police found parishioners of a Christian church in Dushanbe distributing religious pamphlets and detained them for less than twenty-four hours. The church members agreed to stop distributing the brochures. Although religious advertising and literature are not against the law, church members feared local communities might not welcome the distribution and could complain to authorities, jeopardizing their organization. In May 2006 police detained nine Jehovah's Witnesses' members and confiscated their truck full of religious literature. After questioning the group for three hours, the members and literature were released.

The "ban" on printing in Arabic script was thought to be an attempt to prevent the publication of extremist literature, such as flyers circulated by the extremist Islamic political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Authorities in Isfara continued to restrict private Arabic language schools (including restrictions on private Islamic instruction) based on past reports that one such school was hosting a suspected terrorist. Restrictions on home-based Islamic education remained in place. While these restrictions were primarily due to political concerns, they affected religious instruction.

Unconfirmed reports suggested that for the past three years the Government prohibited two popular Islamic scholars from becoming members of the IRPT because it disagreed with their conservative ideology. The Government has confiscated hundreds of audio and video cassettes of their sermons from public shops. Militia also stopped Muslims from outside their districts from coming to their mosques to worship, in an attempt to restrict their teachings.

Between November 2004 and February 2005, Christian Iranian refugees fled Iran into the country. During their stay, the Government did not permit them to reside in the city of Dushanbe, instead relegating them to the city's outskirts. The refugees faced harassment from local citizens. Their children were verbally abused in schools and in some cases were physically harassed. The Iranian embassy also threatened and harassed the refugees. The Government was complacent towards this behavior and did not offer protection. The state migration service attempted to extract bribes from the refugees during each reregistration process. The Christian Iranian refugees left the country in April 2006 through the U.S. government's resettlement program.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government reported ninety-nine persons were detained in 2005 as Hizb ut-Tahrir suspects. Some speculate that the Government may use the Hizb ut-Tahrir label to arrest those not in its favor, including members of the intelligentsia and teachers.

On May 4, 2006, IRPT member Sadullo Marupov died after falling from the third story of a police station in Isfara, a town in the northern Sughd region known for its strong Islamic roots. Officials stated that Marupov committed suicide; however, IRPT members refuted the official statement and claimed that police killed Marupov. Marupov had been detained previously by the police and had told IRPT members that he was tortured with electroshock during his earlier detention. Officials alleged he was a member of Bay'at, a group the Government has labeled as extremist. The IRPT denied this claim, and media reports and local contacts have questioned whether Bay'at even exists. The Government arrested three guards in connection with the case and was investigating the incident at the end of the reporting period.

Along with several mosques and administrative buildings, Dushanbe's only synagogue was partially torn down February 8, 2006, by municipal officials in a land dispute unrelated to religious discrimination. The synagogue is located in the middle of a planned park area. The city and Jewish community leaders were unable to reach a suitable compromise to relocate the synagogue or pursue an alternative solution. The city government offered land for a new synagogue but stated it could not itself provide compensation for the partially razed building, citing "separation of church and state."

In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of arrests of high-profile Muslims, such as the 2003 arrest and sentencing of the IRPT's deputy chairman, Shamsiddin Shamsiddinov. The IRPT stated that this arrest was politically motivated but did not allege it was part of a larger 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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Gradually throughout the reporting period, officials suspended 2001 prohibitions on use of loudspeakers by mosques, issued by the mayor's offices in Dushanbe. These prohibitions apparently were not based on any central directive. Dushanbe city authorities permitted mosques to use loudspeakers, provided the sound was directed towards the interior of the mosque and not out towards the public. Mosques in the Sughd and Khatlon regions openly used loudspeakers directed away from the mosque for the daily call to prayer without facing prosecution.

During the reporting period, women were increasingly permitted to be photographed for official identification while wearing hijabs, particularly to participate on the Hajj.

The Government also relaxed the "ban" on printing in Arabic script by government publishing houses. The Government permitted the printing of materials presented to the director of the publishing house, if submitted for review prior to printing, and deemed to be non-threatening.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Conflict between different religious groups is virtually unknown, in part because there are so few non-Muslims; however, some Muslim leaders occasionally expressed the opinion that minority religious groups undermine national unity and complained that 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, felt both by the Government and the general population.

In 2004 a Baptist missionary was killed in his church in Isfara. A police investigation uncovered two suspects, one of whom fled the country. In late February 2005 court officials sentenced one suspect of the alleged Islamic group, Bay'at, to twenty-four years in prison for the murder. The other was arrested and in April 2005 was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Although government officials claimed the two men were members of Bay'at, media reports and local contacts questioned whether the men actually belonged to such a group and if Bay'at even existed. Some claimed the Government fabricated the group as a scapegoat.

During the period covered by this report, there were no events similar to the vandalism in 2003 that included fires set in the homes of two imams.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

The U.S. embassy intervened on behalf of the Jehovah's Witnesses with the SCRA and the government of Tursonzade, holding meetings and writing letters advocating for its registration. The embassy also worked with UNHCR and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to facilitate the Christian Iranian refugees' departure from the country and resettlement in the United States.

Between April 5 and 8, 2006, the embassy invited Ahmed Younis, national director of the U.S.-based Muslim Public Affairs Council, to the country to speak about Muslims in America, promote religious tolerance, and emphasize the importance of religious freedom.

The embassy supported a Central Asia regional conference for religious leaders and government officials, which was held in Dushanbe on June 8 and 9, 2006, to discuss regional problems, related to religious freedom.

The embassy monitored ongoing religious freedom problems and issues that could potentially become abuses of religious freedom, including matters relating to religious legislation, registration problems and the destruction of the synagogue.

Embassy officers regularly met with religious leaders from across all religious groups, the Government, and international organizations to discuss religious freedom issues and to underscore the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom. The embassy supported programs designed to create a better understanding of how democracies address the issues of secularism and religious freedom.

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