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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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TAJIKISTAN: "No reason to fear" census religion question?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Some fear the religion question in the October nationwide census will be used to facilitate freedom of religion and belief violations. "It is probable that Tajiks who have accepted the Christian faith, or are Ahmadis, or are Salafi Muslims, will feel forced to lie and write that they are Hanafi Muslims," one commentator noted. Some Protestants fear the authorities "are trying to identify our members and where they are located".

People have expressed concern about revealing their beliefs to the state in a nationwide census to be held in the first half of October. This is the first time a census has asked individuals to give their religious affiliation since 1937, when Stalin ruled Tajikistan as part of the then-Soviet Union.

Officials have given varying answers about why a religion question is included. Some say it is needed to give Saudi Arabia data for it to determine Tajikistan's haj pilgrimage quota, while others claim unnamed international organisations want it.

The assistant to Deputy Imomali Nasriddinzoda, head of the parliamentary Committee on Legislation and Human Rights, refused to say why the religion question is on the census. "We cannot talk to you," she claimed, telling Forum 18 that "you need to write to the Foreign Ministry" before putting the phone down (see below).

Some fear the regime, and individuals in small towns and villages, may use the information to target people for freedom of religion and belief violations. Various Protestants, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that "we are afraid that through this the authorities are trying to identify our members and where they are located". Other Protestants pointed out that officials and others "in small towns or villages can use the information against us and violate the freedom of religion and belief of our believers (http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2530)" (see below).

Independent blogger Rustam Gulov from the northern city of Khujand noted that "it is probable that Tajiks who have accepted the Christian faith, or are Ahmadis, or are Salafi Muslims, will feel forced to lie and write that they are Hanafi Muslims. Their conscience will torment them about this. If they write the truth, they may be persecuted not only by state agencies but also by relatives or local people" (see below).

Gulov also commented that "on the whole the less the state knows about the citizen, the better and more peaceful it is. This is because there are no real mechanisms for the protection of personal data in our country." He sees "no reason" for the regime to have precise numbers of the adherents of various religions (see below).

International human rights law protects individuals from being forced to reveal their beliefs (see below).

Voris Murodov of the regime's Statistical Agency claimed that no one will be punished for refusing to answer the religion question. When Forum 18 reminded Murodov that the regime systemically punishes people who exercise their freedom of religion and belief (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31), he claimed that "no control or punishment will follow for indicating their religion or for refusal to do so". He also denied that state agencies will violate the freedom of religion and belief of anyone who reveals their views or beliefs, claiming that "there is no reason for fear" (see below).

Religion question on 2020 census

The census is being conducted in accordance with the 2009 Census Law, which requires a census once every 10 years. The Parliament (which has never faced a free and fair election (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138)) approved an amendment to the Census Law in 2019, adding a requirement that the census should also collect information about individuals' religious affiliation. President Emomali Rahmon signed the amendment into law on 19 July 2019.

Serious violations of the freedom of religion and belief (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31) and interlinked human rights take place in Tajikistan.

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Voris Murodov, Head of the Census Section of the regime's Statistical Agency, said that the 2020 census will be conducted across Tajikistan between 1 and 15 October. "It will be done by way of electronic correspondence, and by recording information on tablet devices or on a paper form during door-to-door meetings," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 17 September.

The census will cover all residents, whether citizens or not, as well as Tajik citizens who temporarily live abroad.

Murodov of the Statistical Agency said his Section was responsible for drawing up the questions on the census form. Question 7 on Form No. 2 (for individuals) is headed "Religion".

The question has five possible answers:

- Muslim

- Christian

- Non-believer

- Refused to answer

- Other (with a box to specify which belief).

Exactly the same question was included in an October 2018 trial census taken in two parts of Tajikistan - the 64th and 91st microdistricts of the capital Dushanbe, and the town of Norak in the south-western Khatlon Region.

Individuals' right to privacy

Under international human rights law, the regime has no right to force anyone to reveal what they think about beliefs. As the United Nations Human Rights Committee's interpretative General Comment 22 on Article 18 ("Freedom of thought, conscience and religion") (http://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx) states: "In accordance with [ICCPR] articles 18.2 and 17 ["Right to Privacy"], no one can be compelled to reveal his thoughts or adherence to a religion or belief."

Why the religion question?

Murodov of the Statistical Agency told Forum 18 the religion question was included as the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138) "asked us to include the question in order to identify exactly how many Muslims exist in the country so that we can give the number to Saudi Arabia for allocating the precise haj quota to Tajikistan".

Asked why this is so important, as Saudi Arabia already allocates the haj quota based on the number of the population of a country, Murodov insisted to Forum 18: "We need to know the real number of Muslims, since we also have non-Muslims living in Tajikistan."

The regime imposes severe restrictions on haj pilgrims (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2315) as part of its systemic violations of freedom of religion and belief.

Parliamentary deputy Abdukhalim Gafforov gave a different reason, claiming to Radio Free Europe's (RFE) Tajik Service on 9 July 2019 that "state agencies and international organisations which cooperate with Tajikistan needed this information". He said that Tajik officials have repeatedly said that more than 90 per cent of the population are Muslims "and our goal is to establish during the census how many followers of Islam we have, how many followers of Christianity, how many of other faiths, and how many atheists".

Sumangul Tagoizoda, Head of the parliamentary Committee on Social Issues, Family and Healthcare which was responsible for the Census Law, denied that any international organisations asked for information. "I do not know any such organisations," she told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 18 September 2020. She could not explain why Deputy Gafforov had made this claim. "It is difficult for me to answer you," she said. Gafforov did not answer his phones on 18 September.

Deputy Tagoizoda refused to say why the religion question was in the census. "I am not prepared to answer you," she said, before refusing to talk more.

The assistant to Deputy Imomali Nasriddinzoda, head of the parliamentary Committee on Legislation and Human Rights, refused to put Forum 18 through to her boss or to say why the religion question was on the census. "We cannot talk to you," she claimed to Forum 18 on 18 September, adding that "you need to write to the Foreign Ministry" before putting the phone down.

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Independent blogger Rustam Gulov from Khujand told Forum 18 on 1 September that he sees "no reason" for the regime to have precise numbers of the adherents of various religions. "Nothing will change because the authorities will find out that Muslims of the country are not 96 per cent for instance but 98 per cent, or that Christians comprise 1.2 per cent and not 1.3 per cent of the population."

Gulov pointed to Article 26 of the Constitution, which declares: "Everyone has the right to independently determine his (her) relationship toward religion, to profess any religion individually or together with others, or to profess none, and to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals, and ceremonies." He also noted that Article 8 states that "religious organisations are separate from the state and may not interfere with state affairs". Gulov commented that "therefore, there is no reason for the state to interfere in this."

A human rights defender, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18: "I think one of the points of this question is that the authorities would like to tell the public or international organisations that Tajikistan allegedly has no Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists or Protestants according to the census. This will be used when the authorities are criticised for violating the freedom of religion and belief of non-Muslims." They commented that "probably many will not reveal their beliefs".

Murodov of the Statistical Agency refused to answer, when Forum 18 asked if the regime will use its claimed census results as an excuse to international actors for freedom of religion and belief violations.

"No reason to fear"?

Murodov of the Statistical Agency claimed that if someone refuses to reveal their views on religion "no punishments will follow". When Forum 18 reminded Murodov that the regime systemically punishes people who exercise their freedom of religion and belief (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31), he claimed that "no control or punishment will follow for indicating their religion or for refusal to do so".

Murodov also denied that state agencies will violate the freedom of religion and belief of anyone who reveals their views or beliefs, claiming: "How many times must I tell you that there is no reason for fear?"

The blogger Gulov noted that there can be many reasons for refusing to answer the census question on beliefs. For example, "they may be afraid of being accused of extremism, or worried about the confidentiality of their personal data."

Gulov also noted that "it is probable that Tajiks who have accepted the Christian faith, or are Ahmadis, or are Salafi Muslims, will feel forced to lie and write that they are Hanafi Muslims. Their conscience will torment them about this. If they write the truth, they may be persecuted not only by state agencies but also by relatives or local people."

The state engages in serious violations of the freedom of religion and belief of people of all beliefs (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31).

The Salafi school of Islam is banned (http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138), Ahmadi Muslims are not allowed to exist, and the only permitted form of Islam is state-controlled Sunni Hanafi (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2354).

Various Protestants, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in August that "we are afraid that through this the authorities are trying to identify our members and where they are located". Other Protestants pointed out that officials and others "in small towns or villages can use the information against us and violate the freedom of religion and belief of our believers (http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2530)".

"No real mechanisms for protection of personal data"

Murodov of the Statistical Agency claimed that "there will be no question to clarify people's Islamic denomination". He added that "non-Muslims also need not be afraid, since all the information will be confidential. The workers filling in the questionnaires with the population will sign non-disclosure of data agreements."

However, independent blogger Gulov noted that "the forms will be filled out by school children or teachers, apparently on ordinary paper forms. One cannot talk about the secrecy of this information. If they tell one or two people in small towns, the information will spread very quickly since all in these towns know each other."

Gulov said that "on the whole the less the state knows about the citizen, the better and more peaceful it is. This is because there are no real mechanisms for the protection of personal data in our country." (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31)

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For more background, see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2138)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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