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TAJIKISTAN: Religious freedom survey, January 2016

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Before the May 2016 UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Tajikistan, Forum 18 News Service notes continuing violations of freedom of religion or belief and related fundamental human rights such as the freedoms of expression and association. Among violations documented by Forum 18 are: a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques; arbitrary official actions, including the arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses using police agent provocateurs; bans on the Jehovah's Witnesses and some Islamic and Protestant movements; the banning of Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the arrest as prisoners of conscience of its senior party figures; forcing imams in state-controlled mosques (the only sort permitted) to preach state-dictated sermons; forcible closure of all madrassahs (Islamic religious schools); a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief, apart from funerals, by people under the age of 18; and state censorship of and bans on some religious literature and websites. The government's actions imply that it thinks that the real threat it faces is people exercising their human rights outside state control.

Tajikistan has a record of violating freedom of religion or belief and related human rights such as the freedoms of expression and association. Among violations documented by Forum 18 News Service are: a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques; arbitrary official actions, including the arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses using police agent provocateurs; bans on the Jehovah's Witnesses and some Islamic and Protestant movements; the banning of Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the arrest as prisoners of conscience of its senior party figures; forcing imams in state-controlled mosques (the only sort permitted) to preach state-dictated sermons; forcible closure of all madrassahs (Islamic religious schools); a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief, apart from funerals, by people under the age of 18; and state censorship of and bans on some religious literature and websites.

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Tajikistan is the smallest country in Central Asia, and is very mountainous. It has the third largest population in Central Asia, with well over 8 million people, about 80 per cent of whom are ethnic Tajiks. Around 15 per cent of the population are ethnic Uzbeks (who like Tajiks are regarded as being of mainly Sunni Muslim background) with the remaining 5 per cent being made up of small percentages of Slavs (mainly Russians, many of Russian Orthodox or other Christian background), Jews and other groups. After gaining independence the country fought a civil war between 1992 and 1997. During this the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, was banned. The IRP fought against the government in the civil war, but was re-legalised afterwards before its 2015 re-banning. Clan and ethnic loyalties were the main factors in the civil war. Poverty is widespread and the economy is very weak, with corruption often being reported. Many people of working age have left the country to seek employment elsewhere, mainly in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Dictatorship, climate of fear

President Emomali Rahmon, a former Soviet Communist Party official, has been head of the government since 1992 and President since 1994. His rule has been marked by multiple human rights violations, little sign of the rule of law, and hostility to democracy including electoral fraud. Parliamentary lower house elections on 1 March 2015 were found by an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission to feature violations including "multiple voting and ballot box stuffing. The disregard of counting procedures meant that an honest count could not be guaranteed". President Rahmon's People's Democratic Party (PDPT) has 51 out of the total of 63 deputies in the lower house of parliament, while the now-banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) has no deputies. The IRP was Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party and was thought by independent observers to have more support than the two deputies it had in the previous parliament indicates. Secular civil society organisations, even those not working on political or human rights issues, spoke to a human rights defender known to Forum 18 of a climate of fear before the elections.

Exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission illegal

In April 2009 a new Religion Law came into force, which made all exercise of freedom of religion or belief with others without state permission illegal. The Law broke the country's international human rights commitments. Its passage was marked by a lack of public consultation, parliamentary debate or explanations of the reasons for its introduction. Among the restrictions imposed by the Law are: a ban on religious activity without state permission and obstacles to gain state registration; restrictions on the number and type of permitted mosques; tight controls on religious education; and the imposition of censorship. The Law is described in detail in Forum 18's March 2011 religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553.

As noted below, further "legal" restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief have also been introduced since the Religion Law's entry into force. Exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief without state permission is punishable with fines under Article 477 of the Code of Administrative Offences. The wording of many parts of the Religion Law – like other laws - is extremely unclear, and allows much room for arbitrary official actions.

Places of worship restricted, closed, bulldozed

Among restrictions on freedom of religion or belief are limitations on the numbers of mosques allowed per head of population, non-permitted mosques having been in the past demolished. Officials also impose an extra-legal ban on Islamic preaching in all but the largest mosques, designated as Central cathedral mosques. Other types of mosques allowed under the Religion Law are medium sized Cathedral mosques, and the smallest Five-fold mosques.

Even before the 2009 Religion Law was passed, the authorities closed down and demolished Muslim, Christian and Jewish places of worship, including the country's only synagogue which was bulldozed despite community protests. No compensation was paid for the demolitions. Very unusually, in March 2009 the Jewish community received a building that they can use as a synagogue. However, it was not the Dushanbe city authorities which provided the building, but Hasan Asadullozoda, President Rahmon's businessman brother-in-law.

After the Religion Law was passed, many mosques were forcibly closed and Muslims warned not to engage in meetings for worship. Officials from Dushanbe Mayor's office and the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) claimed to Forum 18 in January 2011 that the closed mosques "are not mosques", and "cannot be used as mosques". It is unclear why the authorities claim that mosques should apply for registration, when the authorities have decided in advance that they cannot be used for worship. A Dushanbe imam, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of the authorities, told Forum 18 in January 2011 that he welcomes members of a closed mosque to his mosque, but "they want to have their own mosque". Officials would not tell Forum 18 what measures will be taken against imams or local Muslims if they continue worshipping in closed mosques.

Arbitrary official actions, officials' impunity for human rights violations

Arbitrary official actions are routine; in 2007 Jehovah's Witnesses were banned, and as one put it to Forum 18 in 2010, they "live in uncertainty and fear, and cannot worship openly". For example, twice in July 2015, police in the northern Sugd Region detained Jehovah's Witnesses and prepared administrative punishments. Officers raided a meeting for prayer and Bible study in a flat, seizing Bibles, questioning those present at the police station and demanded that they renounce their faith. Khurshed Barotov, Deputy District Police Chief who questioned those detained, claimed to Forum 18 that "we have freedom of religion", but they were "teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat".

On 26 July 2015 police detained two female Jehovah's Witnesses - Gulnora Tegniyeva and Chaborkhon Bozorboyeva - at a meeting at a bus stop arranged with them by an apparent police agent provocateur. This person had previously repeatedly phoned the two Jehovah's Witnesses asking for a meeting to discuss their faith. When the two Jehovah's Witnesses arrived, police arrested them. Police refused to confirm or deny to Forum 18 whether the apparent agent provocateur works for them. The two Jehovah's Witnesses were "hit on the head and slapped" for refusing to sign a police report, though police denied this to Forum 18.

The United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Tajikistan acceded to on 11 January 1995, defines torture as: "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

Under Article 6 of the Convention, Tajikistan is obliged to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture. Under Article 4, Tajikistan is obliged to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature". No official responsible for torturing people exercising freedom of religion or belief appears to have been arrested.

Military comments in 2007 suggested that the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses might possibly be linked to this community's conscientious objection to compulsory military service – which is not permitted in Tajikistan. At the same time "temporary" bans

were also imposed on two Dushanbe Protestant organisations, Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre. The authorities refused to put the ban on Ehyo in writing. Ehyo was allowed to resume its activity in late 2008, but Abundant Life decided in May 2008 to close permanently. "We were asked to change so many points in our charter that it made it impossible for us to function as we intended to," Shaukat Dusmatov complained. He explained that one of the Centre's major functions was printing and importing Christian religious literature. "Realising that the idea of being involved in literature was going to be impossible we decided to stop." (See also the Censorship section below.)

State control of belief communities, especially Islam

Perhaps because Islam is the majority faith, the Islamic community is singled out for special restrictions by a government that appears to wish to control everything. The state restricts the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by Muslims from both inside the Islamic community's structures (notably through the Council of Ulems or religious scholars) as well as outside its formal structures (for example through the Religion Law). In contrast, the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by non-Muslim individuals and communities is mainly restricted by controls outside these communities' formal structures, such as the Religion Law.

The main state agency for such restricting freedom of religion or belief is the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) under the Presidential Administration. The SCRA was re-created in May 2010 to take over roles previously undertaken by the Culture Ministry, which in November 2006 had taken over roles from the previous SCRA.

Tajikistan penalises people for their ideas, not their actions. Even though a Tajik official admitted to Forum 18 that adherents of the Salafi school of Islamic thought had committed no crimes, on 8 December 2014 the Supreme Court ruled that Salafi Muslims are "extremist". The Court's then-Deputy Chair Makhmudjon Ashurov replied "I cannot tell" when Forum 18 asked him what the difference between this and the 2009 ban on Salafis is. He also refused to state how the authorities will identify a person as a Salafi Muslim. The SCRA's then-Deputy Head Mavlon Mukhtarov claimed to Forum 18 that Salafis are "extremist" because they "attend Tajik Sunni mosques and pray differently, and they also argue with mosque attendees about the teachings of Islam".

Supreme Court Chair Khabibullo Amirbekzoda in December 2014 stated that Salafi Muslims will be prosecuted under Criminal Code Articles 307-1 ("Public calls for extremist activity"), 307-2 ("Organisation of an extremist association") and 307-3 ("Organisation of the activity of political parties, social or religious organisations, or other organisations, liquidated or banned by a court for extremist activity"). Punishments under these articles range between 5 and 12 years in jail.

However, Supreme Court Chair Amirbekzoda did not state that Criminal Code Article 307-4 ("Organisation of study groups of a religious extremist nature") would be used against Salafi Muslims. This Article was added in 2011 at the same time as the Parental Responsibility Law was passed, which imposes an almost complete ban on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by people under 18 (see below).

Many Muslims associated with the also banned Tabligh Jamaat Islamic missionary movement were in 2010 given long prison sentences and huge fines. One of the Muslims complained to Forum 18 that he "does not understand why we should be prosecuted for peacefully praying in mosques and propagating Islam".

Tabligh Jamaat was among 10 organisations banned by the Supreme Court in 2006, but the bans were not made public until early 2007. An official of the Supreme Court Chancellery (who would not give his name) told Forum 18 in May 2009 that he knew nothing about a ban on Tabligh Jamaat. He referred Forum 18 to Solehjon Zavkiyev, at that time Deputy Chief of the Supreme Court Apparatus. Zavkiyev also said he knew nothing about the ban and referred Forum 18 to Farrukh Malakhov, the Supreme Court's Press Officer.

An independent human rights defender who is familiar with Tabligh Jamaat followers in Tajikistan described it to Forum 18 in May 2009 as peaceful and said "they tell Muslims how to recognise dangerous Islamic movements (..) This is exactly what Tajikistan needs." A Tabligh Jamaat follower questioned why, if the authorities think the group is harmful, its followers were able to preach openly until April 2009.

Even the authorities have not provably linked any crimes committed because of their beliefs to followers of any of the banned beliefs - the Salafi school of thought, Tabligh Jamaat, Jehovah's Witnesses, or some Protestants. Saifullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18 in May 2010 that he thought the reason for the bans on the two Muslim movements was that they did not "exactly follow the Islam prescribed by the Council of Ulems, which is under the President".

During Friday prayers on 3 July 2015 in the central Khodji Yokub Mosque in Dushanbe, Police Colonel Barotali Khamidzoda, who represents the Interior Ministry's Special Forces controlling "religious extremism" cases, warned attendees that "anyone leaving Tajikistan's mosques before Friday prayers are fully read will be punished". He did not specify what the punishments would be. Colonel Khamidzoda warned that the law-enforcement agencies "will ensure order and discipline during the namaz [Muslim prayer] in all the country's mosques and will spare no effort for the sake of peace and security of believers during prayers". He told Forum 18 that "sometimes Salafis or people from other Muslim movements banned in Tajikistan may attend a mosque and leave in the

middle of the prayers, and we would like to identify those". Asked why all Muslims are being forced to accept the Hanafi school of Islam, Colonel Khamidzoda did not answer.

Rustom Gulov, a human rights defender from Khujand, described Colonel Khamidzoda's statements and warnings as an "example of direct state interference in the private matters of faith of its citizens". Some Muslims do not remain in the mosques until all the prayers are read, Gulov explained to Forum 18. They think that they need stay only until the main part of the prayer is done and then do the rest at home privately. "Who can guarantee that the police will not begin catching innocent people who leave prayers early because they have to leave urgently for important reasons, or think they may do the rest at home?"

In October 2015 the SCRA stated that government employees were prohibited from attending early afternoon Friday prayers, Asia-Plus news agency reported on 12 October. It remains unclear how widespread or enforced the ban is. Human rights defender Gulov and independent legal expert Faredun Hodizoda both confirmed to Forum 18 on 7 January 2016 that it affects at least some officials. Separately, a private-sector business source, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 7 January that some state officials they know were told not to attend mosques, though some still attend mosques.

Central Asia's only religious-based political party banned, state-dictated sermons

Just before the 2015 election, on 27 February, a sermon apparently prepared by the SCRA was read – or at least partly read - during Friday prayers in central mosques nationwide. The text attacked the opposition IRP, praised President Rahmon and his PDPT, and called on Muslims to vote only for candidates from Rahmon's Party. After the elections, another SCRA written sermon called for the IRP to be closed down and for there to be only one party in the country. The SCRA's then-Deputy Head Solehjon Zavkiyev (who previously worked for the Supreme Court), who was then responsible for mosques, denied to Forum 18 that imams were required to read the two state-produced sermons at Friday prayers. Orders to imams to read out such sermons are "not compulsory but only a recommendation", he claimed.

After the election, on 27 March 2015, also during Friday prayers, another pre-written SCRA sermon was read in mosques across the country. The text Forum 18 has seen claimed the 1 March elections showed overwhelming support for Rahmon's party, attacked the IRP as a threat to society, and encouraged Muslims to call on the central government to initiate a referendum to close the IRP down. The text states "let there be only one effective party in Tajikistan". Unlike the 27 February sermon, which was unsigned, the 27 March sermon was signed by Abdurahmon Mavlanov, who is thought to work for the SCRA.

"Many central mosques across Tajikistan just read the preamble of the letter, where the name of our Party is not given explicitly," Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18. But, he continued, "several central mosques in [the capital] Dushanbe and in Sugd Region, including two mosques in Khujand, read the whole letter". Government officials in the municipal administrations of Khujand and Istaravshan District in Sugd Region refused to comment to Forum 18 on either of the pre-written sermon texts.

The Justice Ministry banned the IRP on 28 August 2015 and gave the party 10 days to halt all activities. The deadline was 7 September. Following the ban, more than 10 senior party figures were arrested, including spokesperson Sayfullozoda. They are currently jailed as prisoners of conscience for their political opposition to the government.

All preaching in mosques – not only preaching at election times - is state controlled. For example the SCRA instructed imams across Tajikistan through the state-backed Council of Ulems in February 2014 to preach against LGBTI people and "non-traditional sexual relations". Asked why imams cannot themselves decide what they should preach on, and why the SCRA issued an instruction to all imams on what to preach, The SCRA's then-Deputy Head Zavkiyev denied to Forum 18 that the instruction came from the SCRA. "It was a decision of the Council of Ulems," he claimed, "and I don't see anything wrong in it." He became noticeably upset when Forum 18 asked why the topic of homosexuality was chosen for a centralised preaching instruction, instead of another topic. He refused to answer the question and put the phone down.

Ban on hijabs and beards

President Rahmon on 6 March 2015 condemned women wearing "uncharacteristic" dress and state TV showed footage of police stopping 10 women in hijabs on the street, claiming they were prostitutes. Women nationwide then began to be stopped at kindergartens and told they must not drop off their children while wearing a hijab. However, the SCRA's then-Deputy Head Zavkiyev claimed to Forum 18 that "no one ever banned the hijab or spoke against it".

About the same time, police began forcibly shaving bearded Muslim men throughout the country, local people told Forum 18. "Aren't such actions and bans something that those interested in promoting jihad will use to provoke a reaction?" independent legal expert Hodizoda noted. Deputy Interior Minister Ikrom Umarzoda refused to tell Forum 18 who ordered the beard-shaving campaign. Officials have contradicted themselves on whether police will be held responsible. One victim of the beard-shaving, human rights defender and blogger Rustom Gulov, publicly complained to the President and other senior officials about the campaign's lack of legal basis and the need to punish perpetrators. Gulov stated that the official response "will be an indicator of the value of human dignity in Tajikistan". The only formal response was for him to be questioned about an allegedly "negative comment insulting President Rahmon" left on his blog. Officials demanded this be removed, which was done.

Hostility to international contacts

Article 474-4 of the Administrative Code, which came into force in July 2012, punishes religious organisations which make or maintain international contacts without state permission with fines of up to 100 Financial Units (according to the 2016 state budget, each Financial Unit is 40 Somonis). Article 478 of the Code already punished foreign citizens or organisations for conducting religious activity without Tajik government approval.

On 13 April 2015 the SCRA imposed more restrictions on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, banning under-35s from participating. From 2009 officials imposed a ban on people younger than 16 and older than 80 taking part. The SCRA claims that the under-35s ban is due to renovation works at Mecca, but Saudi Arabia's Embassy in Dushanbe would not confirm this to Forum 18. A 30 December 2015 Government Decree increased the minimum haj age still further to 40.

The SCRA has also barred the international contacts of other communities. From early 2015 the SCRA consistently rejected requests by a variety of non-Muslim registered religious communities to be allowed to invite fellow-believers from abroad to participate in religious events. The Orthodox Church was refused permission to invite two scholars from Uzbekistan to a July 2015 conference. Other religious communities asked Forum 18 not to name them for fear of state reprisals or to identify their would-be foreign guests. Officials have refused to explain the reasons for the ban, which appears to be part of a government desire to reduce religious communities' foreign contacts.

Freedom of religion or belief of children and parents severely restricted

The state also imposes control of Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief in other ways. Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) was allowed to operate until June 2016, all the others having been from July 2013 forcibly closed after a speech by President Rahmon claiming without giving evidence that some of their ex-pupils had become "terrorists". In June 2015 the state-controlled Islamic University, under which the madrassah operated, announced that the madrassah was "temporarily suspended" and claimed that its buildings cannot accommodate all the pupils. The madrassah is still closed, human rights defender Gulov told Forum 18 on 7 January 2016.

Mavlon Mukhtarov of the SCRA, as well as Abdukhakim Sharipov of Sugd Region's Religious Affairs Department claimed to Forum 18 in December 2013 that the suspensions came because the authorities wanted to "bring order" to the madrassahs' legal documents and curricula. Mukhtarov said he "cannot give an exact time" for their reopening. Administrative Code Article 474-3 ("Carrying out of educational and preaching activity by religious communities in institutions of pre-school, secondary school, primary professional, secondary professional and higher professional education, as well as in residential buildings or homes of citizens") was introduced in July 2012.

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee strongly criticised the state's "severe restrictions on freedom of religion" – in its August 2013 Concluding Observations (CCPR/C/TJK/CO/2). Among many other concerns, the Committee "is particularly concerned that Tajik children may receive religious education only from State-licensed religious educational institutions and children below the age of 7 years are denied that right; that all religious education abroad is subject to State permission; and that the State party enjoys excessive power to control activities of religious associations". It called on the government to: "repeal or amend all provisions .. that impose disproportionate restrictions on the rights protected by article 18 of the Covenant [the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - ICCPR]. The State party should reverse its discriminatory refusal to register certain religious denominations."

Officials have continued to stop children receiving Islamic religious education. For example, in December 2014 police in Vahdat arrested and took into custody two Muslim men after raids. Criminal cases were opened against them for teaching school-aged children the Koran and Islam. The families were afraid to give details of the raids and arrests.

Related to this, the 2011 Parental Responsibility Law is hostile to freedom of religion or belief and related rights such as the rights of the child and the freedoms of expression and association. This Law bans jewellery and tattoos, limits the names parents can choose for their children, bans "the encouragement of children to receive education in illegal schools and education institutions as well as from individual persons who do not have permission for such activity", requires parents "not to allow the education of adolescent children abroad without the permission of appropriate state agencies" and bans the participation of children and young people below the age of 18 in religious events apart from funerals.

Officials continue to implement the Parental Responsibility Law. For example, the SCRA wrote to various Protestant churches in December 2014 warning them not to allow children to be at meetings for worship. But threats to suspend the churches' activity have yet to be carried out. The Supreme Court's then-Deputy Chair Ashurov did not answer when asked what Tajikistan intends to do to remove the contradiction between its international human rights obligations and the Religion and Parental Responsibility Laws.

Censorship

As noted above, a particular target for a variety of restrictions by the authorities has been the now-banned Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). In 2013 police in the northern city of Khujand seized "hundreds of booklets" from IRP members, a party member told Forum 18. The booklets, seized ahead of the 15 October Islamic festival of Kurban Bayram (Eid al-Adha), explained "the meaning of the holiday and its values". Police warned party members they could be punished for distributing unapproved religious literature.

Officials apply such censorship to all texts by people of all beliefs. A Baptist was fined in Dushanbe in September 2013 after three church members received religious magazines by post from Belarus. The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police brought this case – and all of at least five other earlier cases. Mavlon Mukhtarov, then Deputy Head of the SCRA, told Forum 18 that censorship "must be done according to the Religion Law".

The "offence" of producing, distributing, importing or exporting religious literature and items of a religious nature which have not passed through the compulsory prior state religious censorship is punishable under Article 474-1 of the Administrative Code, which came into force in January 2011. Religious communities of all faiths have long complained of the high cost of gaining an "expert analysis" from the SCRA for every item of literature, describing the SCRA's censorship fees as "unaffordable".

In August 2015 the State Communications Agency – the government agency that censors the internet - ordered mobile phone operator Tcell to block several websites "for an unspecified period of time", TeliaSonera - the Swedish-Finnish telecom company which owns Tcell - noted on its website. Other internet companies were given similar orders. One of the sites blocked was turajon.org, a site run on behalf of three prominent brothers who are Islamic scholars. The site is hosted in California.

The three brothers - Nuriddinjon, Haji Akbar and Mahmudjon – are sons of a prominent Sufi sheikh Mahamaddrafi Turajon, who died in 2005. Nuriddinjon was an imam of a mosque in Vahdat, west of Dushanbe, which attracted thousands of worshippers to his sermons, some of which have been posted to the website. Over 50 officials from the police, NSC secret police, Prosecutor's Office and the SCRA raided the Vahdat mosque (where two of the Turajonzoda brothers preached) during Friday prayers in December 2011. They accused the mosque leaders of marking a Shia Muslim commemoration, insisting that only Hanafi Sunni rituals should be observed. The two brothers were fined, while nine other mosque members were held for 10 days with no court hearing. The SCRA also removed the two brothers as the mosque's imams and downgraded its status.

Haji Akbar, Chief Mufti in the early 1990s, was prominent with the IRP during the civil war (1992-7), but abandoned the party in 1997 and left the upper chamber of parliament in 2010. He remains active in business and often comments on religious affairs. Mahmudjon is a Muslim scholar.

The website turajon.org hosts a question and answer section where readers of the site can post questions on religious points to the brothers. As women have been barred from attending mosques by the Council of Ulems since 2004, this is one of the few places where they can seek religious rulings directly from male Muslim leaders, two academics Shahnoza Nozimova and Tim Epkenhans observed in a 2013 article. Two of the three brothers publicly opposed the 2004 ban on women in mosques.

The other sites the State Communications Agency ordered blocked in August 2015 were Facebook and YouTube (both of which the Agency regularly orders blocked), as well as nahzat.tj, the website of the opposition IRP, which was banned days later.

Officials deny reality

As noted above the authorities often deny that they have violated the right to freedom of religion or belief, frequently invoking spurious justifications for their actions. For example, Forum 18 asked Abdulkhakim Sharipov, the north-western Sugd Region's senior religious affairs official, on 26 February 2014 whether he thought state control of Islam is being increased. He replied: "Do you think western countries would allow just anybody to open any kind of religious organisation and teach anything they want?" Sharipov explained that by "western countries", he meant any country in Western Europe or North America. Forum 18 informed him that in such countries - unless something like tax exemption or state financial assistance is sought - anyone is free to form a religious organisation to teach and practice their beliefs without any kind of state registration or permission. Sharipov then claimed that "we are not totally controlling exercise of freedom of religion or belief, but we want some order in it".

To control everything with only the pretence of the rule of law

As Forum 18 noted before Tajikistan's last October 2011 UPR, despite the experience of civil war between 1992 and 1997, Tajikistan shows little sign of understanding that genuine security depends on genuine respect for human rights, despite the explicit link made in OSCE commitments and other international human rights obligations the authorities have freely undertaken. Indeed, the authorities behave as if the real threat they face is people exercising their human rights outside the control of President Rahmon and government officials. The authorities' actions appear to be motivated by a wish to control everything with only the pretence of the rule of law. There is no evidence that Tajikistan has any intention of implementing its solemn international and domestic commitments to respect freedom of religion or belief, or other fundamental human rights. (END)

Previous Forum 18 Tajikistan religious freedom surveys are at <http://www.forum18.org/analyses.php?region=31>.

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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