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TAJIKISTAN: Religious freedom survey, December 2020

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Tajikistan restricts freedom of religion and belief, along with interlinked freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Forum 18's survey analyses violations including: ban on and punishments for all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; severe limitations on numbers of mosques; jailing of Muslim, Jehovah's Witness and Protestant prisoners of conscience on alleged "extremism" charges; impunity for torture; jailing of conscientious objectors; and state censorship of religious materials.

Tajikistan has a record of violating freedom of religion or belief and related human rights such as the freedoms of expression and association. Serious violations documented by Forum 18 include but are not limited to:

- a ban on and punishments for all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission;
- bans on visible signs of faith, including hijabs (headscarves) and beards;
- severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques;
- restrictions in the Traditions Law on how funerals can be conducted;
- a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief, apart from funerals, by people under the age of 18;
- forcible closure of all madrassahs (Islamic schools);
- monitoring of religious believers of all faiths, including collecting individuals' religious affiliation in the October 2020 census;
- arbitrary official actions, including the arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses using police agent provocateurs;
- bans on Jehovah's Witnesses and some Islamic and Protestant movements;
- jailing of Muslim, Jehovah's Witness and Protestant prisoners of conscience on alleged "extremism" charges;
- impunity for torture of Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants;
- 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;
- jailing young men who cannot perform compulsory military service on conscientious grounds;
- and state censorship of and bans on some religious literature and websites.

Legal changes enacted in 2020 include: much higher fines in the Administrative Code for exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission and the involvement of foreigners in such activities; a new Countering Extremism Law which ordered close monitoring of exercise of freedom of religion or belief; and increasing the minimum criminal punishments for "inciting hatred or dissension", but making first "offences" subject to administrative not criminal charges.

The government's actions imply that it thinks that the real threat it faces is people exercising their human rights outside state control.

Tajikistan is the smallest country in Central Asia, and is very mountainous. It has around 9 million people, about 85 per cent of whom are ethnic Tajiks. The rest of the population are mainly ethnic Uzbeks (who like Tajiks are regarded as being of mainly Sunni Muslim background) with smaller percentages of Slavs (mainly Russians, many regarded as being of Russian Orthodox or other

Christian background), Jews and other groups. Between 1992 and 1997 the country fought a civil war in which clan and ethnic loyalties were the major factors.

Poverty is widespread and the economy is very weak. The country ranks poorly in Transparency International's 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index, at 153 out of 180 countries. 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.

After March 2015 parliamentary elections Rahmon's People's Democratic Party (PDPT) had 51 out of the total of 63 deputies in the lower house of parliament, while the shortly to be banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) had 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 elections. After the most recent March 2020 parliamentary elections, an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission found: "Systemic infringements on fundamental political rights and freedoms have left no space for a pluralistic political debate, and genuine opposition has been removed from the political landscape."

Banning the IRP, beards, and hijabs

The IRP was banned on 28 August 2015, and more than 10 senior party figures were then arrested and are currently jailed as prisoners of conscience for their political opposition to the government.

Just before the 2015 elections, on 27 February, a sermon apparently prepared by the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (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. SCRA Deputy Head Solehjon Zavkiyev 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.

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. SCRA Deputy Head Zavkiyev claimed to Forum 18 that "no one ever banned the hijab or spoke against it".

Also in March 2015, police began forcibly shaving bearded Muslim men throughout the country. Independent legal expert Faredun Hodizoda noted that "aren't such actions and bans something that those interested in promoting jihad will use to provoke a reaction?" 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 has been for him to be questioned about an allegedly "negative comment insulting President Rahmon" left on his blog. Officials demanded this be removed, which has been done. On 20 February 2016 Okil Sharipov was arrested, in Isfara in Sugd Region, for filming police forcing a group of women who wore hijabs onto a bus to take them to a police station. Sharipov was then jailed for a year on 26 May, and amnestied in late August 2016 after six months' imprisonment.

In July 2017 President Rahmon and other officials made renewed public statements against wearing the hijab and beards. The campaign became "more energised" after those statements, according to human rights defenders. Working groups – including police, employees of the State Committee for Women and Family Affairs, and SCRA officials - raided bazaars and public places to identify women who wear the hijab to punish them. Such raids were publicised in the local media and on State TV Jahonnamo. Women wearing the hijab were punished with fines and in some cases their husbands were questioned and held in police custody. Other women were threatened with punishments unless they stop wearing the hijab, while some were forced to take it off in public places. At least one was "humiliated" during police questioning, as the victim told human rights defenders. Still others lost their jobs. Officials denied to Forum 18 that anyone had been harassed or claimed the raids were merely an "awareness campaign".

Under repeated pressure from the authorities, a man in the northern Sughd Region divorced his wife in 2017 after seven years of marriage. Police had repeatedly summoned him, demanding that he stop his wife, a devout Muslim, from wearing the hijab. Under great pressure from police, the woman's husband evicted her from their house and also began to publicly insult her. "A normal and happy family was forced to break up," a human rights defender told Forum 18. "The woman refused to stop wearing the hijab because she has a strong faith. There are many such tragedies in Tajikistan. Many women are being pressured into stopping wearing the hijab, but they do not want to make their cases public as if they do so their life can become a real hell. They are afraid that they can be branded as terrorists and face prison". Hijab-wearing women have also been refused employment and medical care. Asked why, the Health and Social Protection Ministry claimed to Forum 18 that it "is not responsible for hospitals".

On 28 September 2018 police put up a roadblock on the outskirts of the capital Dushanbe on the road from Vahdat, east of Dushanbe, to stop cars carrying men with beards and women with hijabs. Police forced men with beards into a barber's shop to have their beards shaved off, and women were forced to take off hijab and wear a shawl showing their necks. Universities are also enforcing the beard and hijab ban, and one university has also banned women from wearing a Tajik traditional shawl. Police in Dushanbe are also enforcing the ban with visits to schools.

The Interior Ministry Press Secretary confirmed to Forum 18 that no law bans hijabs or beards, but refused to explain why the authorities try to ban them. No Education Ministry official, from the First Deputy Minister downwards, has been able to give a legal reason for the beard and hijab ban.

Such actions continue. In December 2019, Nilufar Rajabova was one of around 20 women detained in Dushanbe for wearing a hijab. Later that day she was tortured. Sino District Deputy Police Chief Lieutenant Colonel Mashrafi Islamzoda "approached me and cursed me right in front of my face. He pushed me several times, and once hit me on my neck so hard that I fell down. While falling I heard a crack in my spine," Rajabova told Forum 18. She was being medically checked for possible spinal column damage just before being detained, and after Lt-Col Islamzoda hit her "I could not get up independently because I had pain and felt dizzy."

Rajabova's mother was called to Sino Police Station, and "officials also threatened my mother with severe physical assault, and cursed her," Rajabova said. "I could not walk independently, so two police officers helped me to get into the taxi we called." When Rajabova's mother asked the officials what right they have to treat women like this, "they told us that we are not women but provocateurs".

Rajabova was fined 550 Somonis (about two weeks' average wages for those in formal work) under Administrative Code Article 460 ("Petty hooliganism") for allegedly insulting a state official. After two appeals, Judge Takhmina Valizoda of Dushanbe City Court upheld the fine on 4 April 2020. The Judge claimed not to hear Forum 18 when questioned about why Rajabova was fined and why officials suspected of torture were not arrested and put on criminal trial for torture.

Islam particularly targeted for controls

Perhaps because Islam is the majority faith – and so independent non-state controlled Islam is a target for a government hostile to everything outside state control – the Islamic community is singled out for special restrictions in the Religion Law, as well as in arbitrary official actions. There is also an extra-legal ban on Islamic preaching in all but the largest mosques, designated as Central cathedral mosques, medium sized ones as Cathedral mosques, and the smallest as Five-fold mosques.

The state mainly restricts the life of the Islamic community from inside its structures, notably through the Council of Ulems, while it tends to restrict the lives of other communities from outside their structures.

The main state agency for such repression is the SCRA. Among restrictions are limitations on the numbers of mosques allowed per head of population, non-permitted mosques being demolished. Officials are apparently proud of this. On 5 February 2018, the SCRA claimed that 1,938 mosques were in 2017 forcibly closed and converted to secular uses. One human rights defender noted that the SCRA's claim that the mosques were illegal is not credible. They also noted that many closed mosques had refused to complain about their closure, even when offered legal assistance in bringing court cases. "They were afraid to do so."

Press conferences were held in various parts of Tajikistan in January 2018 to announce local mosque closures and the alleged reasons for this. In two cases in the northern Sughd Region, in Isfara and in Bobojon-Gofurov District, officials claimed the mosques were closed at the request of local residents. In neither case were officials able to explain to Forum 18 why they only allow mosques with a capacity far below the possible numbers of worshippers.

Mosque closures continue. In the northern city of Khujand, officials confiscated the Nuri Islom (Light of Islam) Mosque and in January 2020 turned it into a cinema. One local Muslim asked "why didn't the authorities instead restore the old Bahor Cinema building on Syrdarya Street [in the town centre], which is now empty and unused?" Mirzo Salimpur of independent news site Akhbor.com told Forum 18 that many local Muslims protested against the confiscation, stating that "it is a sin to show films in the mosque building".

A Sugd Regional Administration official variously claimed that the mosque "had become a breeding ground for suspicious people" and that "the Mosque community closed it". Officials have used this excuse before, and the Sugd official would not answer when Forum 18 asked why community members wanted to close their own mosque. A human rights defender, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 "many of the closed-down mosques like Nuri Islom have been turned into libraries, culture houses, etc. This is just like in the old Soviet Union."

Mosque-goers are closely monitored, including with surveillance cameras in mosques. In July 2015 an Interior Ministry Colonel in Dushanbe warned mosque-goers during Friday prayers not to leave early, which he claimed was a sign of adhering to non-Hanafi Islam. Notices at the entrances of mosques around the country warn that attendees can pray only according to Hanafi rules. Interior Minister Ramazon Rahimzoda told a Ministry round table on 3 March 2016 that groups of young activists will work in mosques as volunteers and, in cooperation with state agencies, will help catch "extremists", as well as those who do not pray according to Hanafi rules.

Tajikistan penalises people for their ideas, not their actions. On 8 December 2014, the Supreme Court reinforced a 2009 ban on Salafi Muslims - even though in 2009 an official admitted to Forum 18 that adherents of this school of thought had committed no crimes. Court Deputy Chair Makhmudjon Ashurov refused to state how the regime will identify a person as a Salafi. SCRA 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". No provision of the law bans praying differently.

On 13 April 2015 the SCRA imposed more restrictions on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, banning under-35s from participating. From 2009 there has been 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.

In November 2017, the SCRA ordered the removal of all foreign-educated imams, SCRA and Council of Ulems officials said. Human rights defenders told Forum 18 that the campaign to fire Imams as well as recent imprisonments are part of state efforts to "root out the Salafi movement and independent Muslim believers from Tajikistan".

January 2018 amendments to the Religion Law (see below) also imposed tighter SCRA controls over building and opening new mosques. According to the amended Article 8, mosque communities require SCRA permission to use specific buildings for worship, while the SCRA also needs to approve local authorities' plans to allocate land to build a mosque. SCRA permission is required for the appointment of ordinary imams, imam-hatyps (who give sermons) and sar-hatyps (the head of a mosque).

"Mosques have stopped being a social institution, and have become some kind of state agency," a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 in February 2019. "Imams are known to share all information on mosque community members with state agencies."

The human rights defender also pointed out that another sign of mosques becoming a state agency was that they now handed over "a big portion of their income to the SCRA". Corruption is widespread in Tajikistan, as noted above. The SCRA has refused to explain to Forum 18 why it collects money from mosques.

Traditions Law, mourn for the dead only in state-permitted ways

On 29 August 2017, Traditions Law amendments and increased punishments came into force. The numerous new restrictions on freedom of religion and belief and interlinked human rights included: the banning of the normal celebratory meals to honour pilgrims returning from the haj; requiring everyone to respect an undefined "national dress" (Kobiljon Abdukodirov, Head of Parliament's Legal Department, confirmed to Forum 18 on 30 August that this is a de facto ban on wearing the hijab and other so-called "non-traditional" religious apparel); banning the customary offering of food on the 3rd, 7th and 40th days after a funeral; makes the SCRA responsible for defining what procedures should be followed for funerals and the subsequent mourning period; and makes the government responsible for organising all haj and umra pilgrimages to Mecca. Human rights defenders think that this is "to receive money from all for travels and more easily control the pilgrims".

Fines for violating the Traditions Law are for individuals more than four months' average wages for those in a state job, with fines for repeat "offenders" reaching more than two years' average wages.

In 2015 the authorities banned state employees from attending Friday prayers and sermons, even during their lunch hour. One official denied the ban to Forum 18. Others refused to say who ordered such a ban and why.

On Friday 1 September 2017, the date announced by the state as a public holiday to celebrate the Muslim festival of Id al-Adha (Sacrifice), teachers, students and schoolchildren were forced to attend school on the order of Education and Science Minister Nuriddin Sayid. State-controlled mosques backed this, one Dushanbe Imam, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, telling Forum 18 that the Council of Ulems instructed them to make the announcement "since children are banned from participation in religious activity". Teachers were also unofficially banned from attending mosque that day, even if their working day had not

begun.

Also in September 2017, the SCRA and the state-controlled Council of Ulems issued Mourning Regulations imposing a procedure that all ceremonies mourning dead Muslim people and expressing grief must follow. These include:

- Payment of fees for the work of grave-diggers must be made in the presence of an authorised state official;
- Crying while grieving for the dead is allowed. But crying and wailing loudly, casting earth onto one's head, tearing hair out, scratching one's face [all traditional customs] are forbidden;
- Only very close relatives and children of the deceased can stay in the same house with the deceased overnight. Close relatives can only publicly mourn for three days;
- Wearing black clothes during mourning is banned;
- Using microphones to amplify prayers during burial is banned;
- After the burial it is "not recommended" to stay in the house of the deceased for many hours.

A human rights defender, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in October 2017 that the "authorities are radicalising Muslims by such actions". They noted that "the authorities say that they are for national values, but these regulations are actually getting rid of Tajik traditions which have existed for centuries". They also commented: "This is stupidity! Instead of finding real terrorists they punish innocent people."

Against the wishes of families, Islamic funerals were banned for around 50 prisoners killed by police suppressing a Khujand Labour Camp riot in November 2018.

Rights of the child

State restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief are also imposed in other ways. Administrative Code Article 474-3 ("Carrying out of educational and preaching activity by religious communities in educational 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.

All madrassahs (Islamic religious schools) began to be forcibly closed from July 2013 after a speech by President Rahmon claiming, without giving evidence, that some of their ex-pupils had become "terrorists". Mavlon Mukhtarov of the SCRA, as well as Abdulkhakim Sharipov of Sugd Region's Religious Affairs Department claimed to Forum 18 in December 2013 that the suspensions came because the regime wanted to "bring order" to the madrassahs' legal documents and curricula. Mukhtarov said he "cannot give an exact time" for their reopening.

The 2011 Parental Responsibility Law is hostile to freedom of religion or belief and related rights. This Law not only bans jewellery and tattoos, but 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 anyone below the age of 18 in religious events apart from funerals.

These bans continue to be enforced. In December 2018, Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayev of the SCRA visited one religious community without any warning or invitation to demand information, a human rights defender who knows the community but is not part of it told Forum 18. Tukhtakhojayev is responsible within the SCRA for non-Muslim communities.

"While Tukhtakhojayev was present, a few children under the age of 10 came in to the meeting to see their parents briefly," the human rights defender who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals stated. "Tukhtakhojayev did not say anything during the meeting, but a few days later summoned the leaders of the religious community for questioning. He then forced them to write a statement explaining the reasons why the children were present in the meeting."

The community was then under Administrative Code Article 474 ("Violation of the Religion Law") fined 7,700 Somonis, equivalent to almost eight months' average wage.

On 11 December 2018, Konibodom Police in the northern Sugd Region opened a criminal case against Mujibahon Isanova, a local Jehovah's Witness. They did not explain what crime she is alleged to have committed, but the case follows her complaints against bullying by school staff of her eight-year-old son. In front of the class they called the boy "a 'terrorist', 'traitor', and an 'enemy of the State'". The criminal case appears to have been closed later.

On 2 January 2020 President Rahmon signed a new Law on the System of Warning Against and Prevention of Violations of the Law by Minors. This tasked the SCRA with: taking part in such warning and prevention programmes; conducting "informational/agitational measures"; and "unmasking and registering violations of the law by under-18-year-olds in the area of freedom of conscience and the activity of religious associations".

The new Law did not add to the SCRA's tasks under existing laws, but it did restate existing SCRA priorities in restricting the exercise of freedom of religion and belief. President Rahmon also on 2 January signed Administrative Code and "countering extremism" legal changes which also increased restrictions on exercising freedom of religion and belief (see below).

Laws allowing arbitrary official actions

The Religion Law, which came into force in April 2009, makes all exercise of freedom of religion or belief with others without state permission illegal. Its passage was marked by a lack of public consultation, parliamentary debate or explanations of the reasons for its introduction. Among the other restrictions imposed by the Law are: obstacles to gaining state registration; restrictions on the number and type of permitted mosques; tight controls on religious education; and the imposition of censorship.

To gain top-level registration as a "religious organisation", 10 adult citizen founders are needed, who have to gain a certificate from the local authorities confirming that adherents of the religious faith have lived in the local area for at least five years. The founders must supply their citizenship, home address and date of birth, provide an account of their beliefs and religious practices and describe their attitude to education, family and marriage, and health of their adherents. Religious organisations have to specify where they operate and all the activity they undertake in their charters, and have to report annually on their activity or face being de-registered. The SCRA must conduct "expert analyses" of a religious association's religious teaching, the veracity of information supplied on beliefs and rituals, and on the association's literature and religious objects. Many religious communities have told Forum 18 that they have been unable to gain state registration.

These registration requirements break Tajikistan's international human rights law obligations, as outlined in the OSCE/Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>) – for example reviewing a religious community's beliefs before granting legal status to it. The Religion Law is described in detail in Forum 18's March 2011 religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553).

In January 2018, changes to the Religion Law increasing restrictions came into force. "The Law represents total control and is unjust," one human rights defender told Forum 18. The 2018 changes: allow the state to restrict manifestations of freedom of religion or belief on a wide range of grounds not permitted under international human rights obligations; increase religious organisations' requirements to report all their activity to the state; require state approval for the appointment of all Imams; and increase state control both on religious education at home, and on those travelling abroad for such education.

People from a variety of religious communities, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that they already previously had to submit to the state full details of all their activity. "We are afraid to give more personal details of our members and their exercise of freedom of religion and belief," one community leader said. But parliamentary deputy Muradullo Davlatov – a former state religious affairs official - defended the new restrictions. "We do not need to be afraid of control," he told Forum 18. "In all normal countries of the world religious organisations are controlled."

The wording of many parts of the Religion Law and Administrative Code is unclear, allowing much room for official arbitrary actions. In December 2018 some religious communities asked the SCRA to hold a round table explaining the January 2018 legal changes. After frequent raids in 2018, "religious communities wanted the SCRA to explain how they can carry out their normal exercise of freedom of religion and belief without SCRA interference, and without the fear of being punished", a community member who did not wish to be named for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. The SCRA refused to hold a round table, replying that "religious communities must obey the law and give us any information whenever we ask for it".

Intrusive reporting requirements, financial contributions demanded by officials

From January 2019, SCRA officials renewed demands to communities of all beliefs to give the SCRA "all kinds of information on the number of their members, finances and activities", a member of one religious community who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Officials have been particularly interested in community finances, as well as whether children under the age of 10 attend meetings.

Compulsory annual reports, which particularly focus on community finances, were imposed following the January 2018 Religion Law changes. An amendment to Article 19 requires all religious communities to provide the SCRA "on request with information on the sources of income, inventory of its property, expenditure of its resources, number of its employees, salaries paid, the sums of taxes paid and other necessary information". Even before these changes, the SCRA illegally demanded that religious communities had to complete a detailed SCRA questionnaire every year.

The 2019 version of the annual report form required that non-Muslim communities must state in Russian:

- which [state controlled] newspapers and magazines the religious community subscribed to, including the total amount of money paid for the subscription;
- the amount of money given to charity, including the amount given to the needy young couples, to orphans, assistance to disabled persons and sick, help to poor families;
- the amount of money given to the state-controlled Public Fund for Charity;
- the amount given for help to those who suffered natural disasters;
- any other amounts given for other charity not specified in the form;
- how many orphans, disabled persons or individuals from poor families the religious community provided material assistance to;
- how many days of voluntary community work were done, including subbotnik (state-imposed forced "voluntary" community work on Saturday), and a full description of the works done;
- the amount of money spent on planting fruit-bearing trees, decorative trees, and flower beds;
- the total income of the religious community for the past year, with how much was spent and how much remains;
- how much was spent on salaries, repair of buildings, taxes, and utility bills;
- how many video cameras for surveillance were installed in the religious community's building, and how many are functioning;
- how many official letters the religious community received from state agencies, how many it has replied to already, and how many await replies;
- and a list of all international organisations the religious community cooperated with in the past year.

The regime carefully examines the completed forms. One local Protestant, who wishes to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that a local administration summoned a church leader to their offices, and went through the completed 2019 form item by item. When "they answered yes, the official put a plus sign in front of each item on their list".

The church leader was not directly told that "officials will punish a church if it does not make any financial contribution to state programmes and projects. But the direct questions gave the church leader the strong impression that churches will be punished if they don't do this." As noted above, corruption is widespread and the country ranks poorly in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index.

Officials already have extensive information on religious communities, and for the first time since 1937 the national census conducted in October 2020 questioned individuals on their beliefs. There were five possible answers:

- Muslim
- Christian
- Non-believer
- Refused to answer
- Other (with a box to specify which belief).

Officials act as if there are no legal controls on their actions. One religious community in early 2019 asked Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayev, who is responsible within the SCRA for non-Muslim communities, for a formal written request for the information he wanted. He replied that he will not put anything in writing, claiming that "you need to obey my verbal commands". He also claimed: "My verbal commands are the law as I represent the law. If you don't obey my verbal commands you will be in trouble. We [the SCRA] will come and take any documents we want."

Jailing "extremist" prisoners of conscience, raiding worship meetings, closing churches

Another arbitrary official action was the July 2017 jailing for three years of 42-year-old Protestant Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'". The government threatened family members, friends,

and church members with reprisals if they revealed any details of the case, trial or jailing. "We are afraid of more arrests or other punishments," Protestants told Forum 18. The Pastor was jailed under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 as then worded ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media"), which carries a maximum punishment of five years' imprisonment.

The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police, together with the SCRA and other state agencies, raided congregations affiliated to Kholmatov's Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church in Sugd Region in February 2017. Officials closed down the congregation in the town of Konibodom in March 2017 after interrogating and torturing church members, and NSC secret police officers pressured employers into firing church members from their jobs. The NSC arrested Pastor Kholmatov in April 2017 after they raided his Church also, and harassed and physically tortured its members. Suspect torturers have not been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture, as binding legal obligations under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment require.

One official claimed to Forum 18: "All religions are free in Tajikistan and the state does not interfere in their activity". Protestants strongly disputed officials' claims. "Church meetings continue, but how can things be normal after all that happened? The church is very concerned for the Pastor," they said. "A large group of believers have stopped attending the church after the raids, interrogation and harassment. They are afraid of being arrested like the Pastor."

Sunmin Sunbogym's two buildings - in Konibodom and Khujand – have both been sealed by the authorities and left empty since the 2017 raids. "After the 2017 raids and arrest of Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, the number of worshippers in Khujand itself went down from roughly 500 people to about 100," a Protestant told Forum 18 in February 2020. The fall in numbers was particularly noticeable after the buildings were confiscated. "People are afraid to go to church because of what happened."

The authorities confiscated the Khujand building in 2018, claiming that they wanted to turn it into a kindergarten. Yet there is still in 2020 no sign of the kindergarten. Officials have refused to discuss the issue. As well as ordering the building's confiscation, courts have refused to order compensation to be paid for the large financial sums the Church spent since 1995 to restore the now-confiscated building. Judges and court officials have refused to discuss their decisions or their legality.

Sunmin Sunbogym's Khujand congregation now meets in a space made from two standard 40-foot shipping containers placed on the land around its building. "Church members are praying for a new building as they feel that they meet in a cage instead of a normal building," local Protestants complained. "Also, the Church has to pay a large electricity bill to keep the temperature inside the metal containers normal in the cold winter and hot summer months."

In February 2019, officials arrested 68-year-old Jehovah's Witness Shamil Khakimov, who is in poor health, for allegedly "inciting religious hatred" under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 as then worded ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media"). However, prisoner of conscience Khakimov's real "crime" seems to be that the regime thinks he leads Khujand's Jehovah's Witness community. He was prosecuted for books, other literature, photos, videos, audios, computer files and mobile phone data seized from him and other community members, which the Prosecutor's Office claimed contain "features of extremist activity".

The arrest followed police raids on Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for worship. During interrogations which lasted for between 20 minutes and 14 hours, police forced people to sign statements that they were not tortured, yet some detainees were tortured. Contrary to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, no officials suspected of torture have been arrested or put on criminal trial for torture.

Among the evidence in Khakimov's trial was a "state religious expert analysis" of a Tajik translation of the Bible published by the Institute for Bible Translation (IBT) in Moscow. (The IBT is not linked to Jehovah's Witnesses and its translations are used by a wide range of Christians.) The analysis, commissioned by the NSC secret police and conducted by three local Imams, concluded: "The book does not correspond to our society of Hanafi Muslims, its propaganda and distribution among the Muslim people does not meet the goals of our society, and its distribution among Hanafi Muslims causes confrontation and schism, and leads to misunderstandings."

Khakimov was tried in closed hearings in Khujand's Investigation Prison in August and September 2019, during which no evidence was produced that he had harmed anyone. The judge jailed him for seven years and six months in strict regime custody (reduced in summer 2020 under amnesty by two years, three months). On his projected release in May 2024, when he would be 73, Khakimov would then be deprived of the right to participate in any religious organisation for three years, a period due to end in May 2027.

Independent journalist Daler Sharipov was on 16 April 2020 jailed for one year by a Dushanbe court under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 as then worded ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

Sharipov denied the charges, brought after the NSC secret police had detained him for questioning and raided his flat in January 2020, confiscating religious books and his laptop computer. The Prosecutor General's Office claimed that the charges related to media articles which were allegedly "extremist" and "aimed at inciting religious hatred", as well to as an allegedly "illegally published" booklet supposedly "aimed at inciting young people to jihadist ideology and calls for the commission of extremist and terrorist acts". A human rights defender, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that in the booklet "there is absolutely no malice or incitement there to religious hatred which the authorities accuse him of". They also noted that Sharipov had published articles speaking of Islam as a religion of peace, and Muhammad as a prophet of peace.

His lawyer Abdurakhmon Sharipov (not a relation) told Forum 18 that Sharipov would not appeal against the one year sentence as "he does not think that the Courts will revoke his sentence. Appealing is a waste of time and money, he thinks." Also the appeal process would take at least a year, and he hopes to be freed under amnesty before the end of the sentence.

Impunity for torture

Impunity for multiple instances of torture of Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants continues. This includes conscientious objector and prisoner of conscience Jovidon Bobojonov, who was tortured by soldiers kneeling on his neck. Officials have refused to tell Forum 18 why suspect torturers have not been arrested and put on criminal trial for torture, as binding legal obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment require.

Jailing conscientious objectors to military service

Military service of two years is compulsory for almost all able-bodied young men between the ages of 16 and 27. Article 1 of the November 2000 Universal Military Obligation and Military Service Law includes the provision: "In accordance with the law, a citizen has the right to undergo alternative service in place of military service. The procedure for undergoing alternative service is determined by law". However, no law enacting alternative service has ever been adopted.

Indeed, military comments in 2007 suggested that the ban that year on Jehovah's Witnesses might be linked to this community's conscientious objection to compulsory military service. The Jehovah's Witness community in the capital Dushanbe gained state registration in 1994 and was re-registered in 1997. However, the Culture Ministry banned the community in October 2007 on the orders of the Prosecutor General. A 2009 re-registration attempt was rejected. Also in 2007, "temporary" bans were also imposed on two Dushanbe Protestant organisations, Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre. The Abundant Life ban appears to be related to its printing of Christian religious literature (see the Censorship section below).

In defiance of its international human rights obligations, and despite repeated requests from the UN Human Rights Committee, as well as the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Tajikistan has not introduced a possibility for a genuinely civilian alternative service to the military conscription imposed on young men.

Those unable to serve in the armed forces on grounds of conscience face prosecution. In April 2017 18-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Daniil Islamov was forcibly conscripted into the military against his will, despite health problems from his childhood preventing him doing military service even if he wanted to do it. After refusing to serve in the army, he was detained in a military unit. Islamov requested to perform alternative civilian service, but was refused as there is no legal right to alternative service. In October 2017 he was sentenced to six months' jail under Criminal Code Article 376, Part 1 ("Evasion by an enlisted serviceman of fulfilment of military service obligations by way of inflicting on oneself injury (self-mutilation) or evasion by simulation of sickness or by other deception"). Officials also attempted to force conscientious objector Islamov to wear military uniform and take the military oath.

In June 2017 Colonel Musa Odinzoda, Deputy Chief of the General Staff, told Islamov's mother that he cannot do alternative service because no domestic legal provision exists for this. Similarly, Rakhmonali Saidaliyev, Qurghonteppa's Military Prosecutor, told Forum 18 in August 2017 that Islamov cannot do the alternative civilian service he is willing to do as "Tajikistan does not have alternative service."

Deputy Murodullo Davlatov, a member of Parliament's Lower Chamber and Deputy Head of its International Relations Committee, claimed to Forum 18 in February 2017 that "the people of Tajikistan do not want alternative service, and Parliament represents the will of the people". Tajikistan has never held an election found to be free and fair by Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Missions. Asked whether prisoner of conscience Islamov and human rights defenders do not represent people of Tajikistan, and whether Islamov is entitled to his human rights, Davlatov replied: "He violated the law, which is why he was arrested."

The 13 October 2017 court decision stated that Islamov's six month sentence started from that date. On 5 October the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated (A/HRC/WGAD/2017/43) that Tajikistan should release prisoner of conscience Islamov "immediately". However, he was released only in April 2018.

On 13 August 2019, Khujand's Military Conscription Office summoned 19-year-old Jehovah's Witness Jovidon Bobojonov. He replied with a written request to perform alternative civilian service, but on 4 October officers took Bobojonov into custody and sent him against his will to military unit 45075 in Rudaki District just south of Dushanbe.

At the military unit, officers tried to pressure him into wearing a military uniform and taking the military oath of allegiance. He refused to do this. On one occasion, when Bobojonov refused to put on the military uniform, six military unit members attacked him. The soldiers twisted his arms behind his back and forced him to the ground. Bobojonov's head was pressed with an army boot to the floor, while his neck was clamped with their knees. When he tried to resist, they beat him in the kidneys. The men tried to take off his trousers and put on the military uniform trousers. The more he resisted, the more they pressed on his neck with his knee. Then he passed out.

When Bobojonov woke up, he was bound, Jehovah's Witnesses added. He was seated on a chair but could not keep his balance, so someone held him in the chair so that he would not fall off. Contrary to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, no officials suspected of torture have been arrested or put on criminal trial for torture.

Major-General Musa Odinzoda, Deputy Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, in a 28 October 2019 letter to Bobojonov's parents, claimed that Bobojonov "committed a major crime by refusing to serve in the Armed Forces". Odinzoda insisted that serving in the military is Bobojonov's "sacred duty" and that his conscription was not therefore illegal. Neither the Major-General nor his fellow officers were willing to answer Forum 18's questions. Other officials claimed that as there is no law on alternative service refusal to do military service is a crime.

On 2 April 2020 Bobojonov was jailed for two years in a labour camp. On 1 November 2020 he was released under amnesty after serving nine months of his sentence

The latest conscientious objector arrested pending trial is Rustamjon Norov, a 22-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Dushanbe who had offered to perform alternative civilian service. On 24 September 2020, Dushanbe's Sino District Conscription Office summoned Norov, where officers questioned him for three hours and declared him fit to perform military service. On 1 October police took him "by force under a false pretext" back to Sino District Conscription Office and he was then held for two days without being allowed to consult a lawyer. On 3 October, officials sent Norov to military units in Khujand in the northern Sughd Region, and on 17 October Sughd Military Prosecutor's Office accused him of falsifying his medical history to evade military service, which he denies. He faces charges under Criminal Code Article 376, Part 2 ("Refusal to perform military service duties with the purpose of evading it completely"). The Investigator completed the indictment on 11 December ready to hand to court. Norov is being held in the northern city of Khujand awaiting trial and no trial date has yet been set.

Arresting and jailing Muslims returning to Tajikistan

Officials have also arrested and jailed Muslims returning to Tajikistan who are accused of exercising freedom of religion and belief in ways the regime dislikes.

Despite writing a letter seeking "repentance" at the request of officials, 36-year-old Mukhtadi Abdulkodyrov was arrested by National Security Committee (NSC) secret police officers on 1 December 2018. He had just returned to Tajikistan after working for four years in Saudi Arabia to support his wife and five children. He faced up to eight years in prison in a criminal case to punish him for allegedly being a Salafi Muslim. "I want to let you know that for 36 years of my life I have never committed a crime," Abdulkodyrov had written to the Interior Minister before his return. He had been expecting a pardon for voluntarily renouncing any connection with Salafi Islam, which Tajikistan's Supreme Court banned in 2009. "Mukhtadi did what the authorities asked him to do, but he was arrested instead," a family friend complained. A General Prosecutor's Office official and an official of the Interior Ministry's Department for the Struggle against Organised Crime refused to tell Forum 18 why Abdulkodyrov had been arrested. A Dushanbe court handed him a suspended term and he was released on probation in March 2019.

Nearly a year after his return to Tajikistan in February 2019 and amnesty, a Dushanbe court on 2 January 2020 handed 35-year-old Muslim Sadridin Mulloyev a 12-year strict regime jail term. Prosecutors accused him as a former member of the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, which Tajikistan's Supreme Court banned in 2006. They also accused him of support for the activities of mercenaries. His family reject all the charges against him. The trial was shrouded in secrecy, with little information made public and officials refusing to answer questions. Officials prevented Mulloyev from having contact with his lawyer or his family.

Hairiddin Mulloyev believes the charges were fabricated so that his son could be imprisoned. "My son is innocent," he insisted to Forum 18 from the town of Kulob in January 2020. "He is no mercenary, no recruiter, and no terrorist." He believes that his son was arrested "because of his past activity as a Tabligh Jamaat member". Sadridin Mulloyev completed a five-year jail term in 2013 for membership of the group. Faredun Hodizoda, a legal expert from Dushanbe, told Forum 18 that he does not think that Mulloyev is a terrorist.

On 29 December 2019, officials arrested 36-year-old Muslim Khayriddin Dostakov at Dushanbe Airport as he returned from Russia to visit relatives. Officials claimed that he spread "extremist ideas". Officers questioned him about whether he had become a Shia Muslim or spread Shia beliefs. Tajikistan's regime is hostile to exercising Islamic beliefs in ways that are not both state-controlled and Sunni Hanafi. Unlike Salafi beliefs, Shia Islam has not been banned.

Dostakov lived in Moscow and one of his main tasks "was to warn Tajik migrants he met in Russia about the dangers and consequences of being drawn into the conflicts in Iraq and Syria", Bakhrom Khamroyev of the Russian human rights group Memorial told Forum 18. "It is ridiculous that Tajikistan's authorities accuse him of calling on people to commit extremist activity." Parvina Iloliyeva, Dostakov's wife, also strongly denied the authorities' claims. "They have no evidence to prove that my husband propagated extremism or called on people to join extremist groups," she told Forum 18 in January 2020.

Dostakov was tortured into making a false "confession". Khamroyev of Memorial told Forum 18 that Dostakov "is being tortured and his face and body is all swollen. Dostakov does not look like himself, and was tortured with electric shocks." He "lost consciousness several times". Questioned by Forum 18 about this, one Interior Ministry official gave a short laugh.

Norak Police and Dushanbe Prosecutor's Office officials raided Dostakov's parents' home and confiscated books on "the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his family, the teachings of traditional Islam, and some books criticising movements such as Salafis and others for inciting hostility between Sunni and Shia Islam".

The authorities freed Dostakov from Investigation Prison on 25 August 2020 after finding no evidence of extremism and closed the criminal case against him.

Steadily increasing legal restriction on exercising freedom of religion and belief

- January 2020 "Countering Extremism Law"

On 2 January 2020 President Rahmon signed a new Law on the System of Warning Against and Prevention of Violations of the Law by Minors (see above). The same day he also signed a Countering Extremism Law, to replace a similar 2003 Law. The new Law defines "extremism" as "the expression of ideology and extremist activity directed at resolving political, social, societal, ethnic, racial, regional and religious issues by means of violence and other illegal activities". Included in the definition of "extremist activity" is "inciting ethnic, racial, regional or religious hatred or discord".

Article 11, Part 8 of the new Law specifically tasks the SCRA with: studying religious communities' exercise of freedom of religion and belief; "carrying out the unmasking of and warning against the activity of unregistered religious associations"; monitoring violations of the Religion Law; issuing warnings and taking cases to court to liquidate religious communities which have violated the Countering Extremism Law; taking part in controlling religious education in Tajikistan and abroad; conducting "informational/agitational measures"; and undertaking religious "expert analyses".

The new Law did not add to the SCRA's tasks under existing laws, but it did restate existing SCRA priorities in restricting the exercise of freedom of religion and belief.

- January 2020 Administrative Code increased fines

Administrative Code amendments significantly increasing the fines for several freedom of religion and belief-related "offences" were also signed into law by President Rahmon on 2 January. These included fines for without state permission exercising freedom of religion or belief by leading or taking part in worship meetings or other activity. Foreigners exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission are also targeted.

Administrative Code fines are levied in Financial Units. The 2020 state budget set the Financial Unit from 1 January 2020 at 58 Somonis. This means a fine of 100 Financial Units is 5,800 Somonis, equivalent to about four months' average wage for those in formal work, but a far higher burden for those without work or on pension.

Under Article 474-4, Part 1 ("Establishment by religious communities of international links, including international religious links with foreign organisations"), the fine was raised from between 30 and 40 to between 50 and 100 Financial Units.

Under Article 474-4, Part 2 ("Establishment by religious organisations of international links, including international religious links with foreign organisations without the agreement of the state organ for religious affairs"), the fine was raised from between 50 and 100 to between 200 and 300 Financial Units.

Under Article 477, Part 1 ("Leadership of the activity of social or religious associations and organisations not registered in accordance with the established procedure of the law"), the fine was raised from between 30 and 50 to between 100 and 200 Financial Units.

Under Article 477, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of social or religious associations and organisations not registered in accordance with the established procedure of the law"), the fine was raised from between 3 and 7 to between 70 and 100 Financial Units.

Under Article 477, Part 3 ("Financing the activity of social or religious associations and organisations not registered in accordance with the established procedure of the law"), the fine was raised from between 10 and 20 to between 40 and 50 Financial Units for individuals; from between 40 and 50 to between 100 and 200 Financial Units for officials; and from between 200 and 300 to between 800 and 1,000 Financial Units for legal entities.

Under Article 478, Part 1 ("Undertaking religious activity by foreign religious organisations, their representations, branches, foreign citizens or individuals without citizenship in Tajikistan without registration"), the fine was raised from between 15 and 20 to between 50 and 100 Financial Units for foreign citizens and individuals without citizenship plus deportation from Tajikistan; from between 30 and 40 to between 300 and 500 Financial Units for leaders of foreign religious organisations, their representations and branches plus deportation from Tajikistan; and from between 200 and 300 to between 800 and 1,000 Financial Units for foreign religious organisations, their representations and branches.

Under Article 478, Part 2 ("Violation of the Religion Law by foreign religious organisations in carrying out their activity"), the fine was raised from between 20 and 30 to between 200 and 300 Financial Units for leaders of foreign religious organisations, their representations and branches plus deportation from Tajikistan; and from between 300 and 400 to between 1,000 and 1,500 Financial Units for legal entities.

Under Article 478, Part 3 ("Systematic carrying out by foreign religious organisations of activities contradicting their statutes, as well as failing within the established period to remove violations and inadequacies serving as a basis for the halting of their activity"), the fine was raised from between 40 and 50 to between 300 and 500 Financial Units for leaders of foreign religious organisations, their representations and branches; and from between 400 and 500 to between 2,000 and 3,000 Financial Units for foreign religious organisations, their representations and branches.

The regime's hostility to communities having international contacts predates the latest Administrative Code changes. For example, in October 2017 police, NSC secret police and SCRA officials raided a Protestant church in Dushanbe during a Sunday morning meeting for worship. They initially claimed to have seen the church's foreign-hosted website, but seemed more interested in the children's club and the church's stock of books. The church was subsequently fined.

- December 2020 "inciting hatred or dissension" legal changes

On 17 December 2020, President Rahmon signed amendments to the Criminal Code and Administrative Code. The Criminal Code amendment reworded Article 189, Part 1 to increase the types and location of any crimes of "inciting hatred or dissension" and the minimum punishment, but restricted the Article's application to individuals who have already been similarly prosecuted under the Administrative Code within one year. The Administrative Code amendment introduced a new administrative offence of "inciting hatred or dissension". The amendments came into force on their official publication on 21 December 2020.

The amended Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 reads: ("Inciting social, racial, national, local or religious (mashab) hatred or dissension, humiliation of racial, national, religious (mashab) or local dignity, as well as propaganda of the specificity and superiority of citizens based on their attitude to religion (mashab), language, racial, national or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media or telecommunications networks, including the internet, within a year after the imposition of administrative penalties for such offences"). Punishment is a jail term of between two and five years (compared to a restricted freedom sentence or a jail term of up to five years in the previous text).

The new Administrative Code Article 462-1 reads: "Inciting social, racial, national, local or religious hatred or discord, humiliation of racial, national, religious or local dignity, as well as promoting the uniqueness and superiority of citizens in terms of their attitude to religion (mashab), language, race, nationality or place, if these acts were committed in public or with the use of mass media or telecommunications networks, including the Internet, in the absence of evidence of a crime." Punishments are a fine of 50 to 100 Financial Units (two to four months' average wage for those in formal work) or imprisonment of five to 10 days.

Censorship

The authorities have long imposed censorship linked to freedom of religion or belief, applying it to all texts by people of all beliefs. 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 was created with the addition of Article 474-1 to the Administrative Code. 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".

At the same time the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in 2007 (see Jailing conscientious objectors to military service section above), "temporary" bans were also imposed on two Dushanbe Protestant organisations, Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life

Christian Centre. The regime 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 stated. 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."

In April 2017 a Protestant who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisal was fined about 1,750 Somonis (nearly two months' average wages for those in formal work) for in public giving someone a Tajik-language New Testament. Police also confiscated Tajik-language Bibles and New Testaments as well as his laptop computer from the Protestant. The authorities warned the Protestant's church that their members must not give out religious literature in public places.

In December 2018, customs officers at Dushanbe Airport confiscated 5,000 religious calendars that Baptists were importing. The calendars had photos for each of the 12 months of 2019, and had one quotation from the New Testament for each month. However Rahmonali Rahimzoda of the Customs Service told Radio Free Europe on 14 February 2019 that "following the conclusion of linguistic experts in the Culture Ministry that found elements of propaganda of an alien faith, the calendars were confiscated". Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the SCRA did not answer when asked by Forum 18 on 21 February why the state might regard some faiths as "alien", or whether followers of "alien" faiths have greater or less freedom of religion and belief than followers of "non-alien" faiths.

The calendars were destroyed and the Church was fined 4,000 Somonis, which is about four months' average wage, under Administrative Code Article 474-1.

Censorship also includes the internet, this type of censorship being imposed by the State Communications Agency ordering mobile phone companies and internet providers to block specified websites.

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

The regime, despite the experience of civil war between 1992 and 1997, shows little sign of understanding that genuine security depends on genuine respect for human rights. This is despite the explicit linkage between these concepts made in the international human rights obligations the regime has freely taken on.

Indeed, the regime acts as if the real threat it faces is people exercising their human rights outside state control, and its 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 the regime has any intention of implementing its binding international obligations to respect freedom of religion and belief and other fundamental human rights. (END)

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

Previous Forum 18 Tajikistan religious freedom surveys (<https://www.forum18.org/analyses.php?region=31>)

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

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