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TAJIKISTAN: Authorities obstruct Ismaili commemoration of Aga Khan's death

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Ismaili Shia Muslims gathered at the Ismaili Centre in Khorugh in Mountainous Badakhshan on 5 February to mourn the death of their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan IV. NSC secret police officers and other officials removed loudspeakers for those unable to get in for lack of space, warning those who protested. Electricity to the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe was cut off on 11 February at the moment the homage ceremony for the Aga Khan V began. The regime is taking steps to isolate Ismailis from the worldwide community.

Authorities both in the city of Khorugh in the south-eastern Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region and in the capital Dushanbe obstructed ceremonies in February related to the death of the Aga Khan IV, the 49th hereditary imam and spiritual leader of the world's Ismaili Shia Muslims, and the appointment of his son as the Aga Khan V, the 50th imam.

In Khorugh on 5 February, hundreds of Ismailis gathered in the cold at the Ismaili Centre to mourn the Aga Khan's death. "Soon National Security Committee (NSC) secret police officers and other officials arrived at the scene," an Ismaili told Forum 18. "They removed the loudspeakers put outside so that those who were not inside the building could hear those speaking inside, as well as the live broadcast of the ceremony of Prince Rahim the Aga Khan V being named as the new spiritual leader of the Ismailis" (see below).

When local people demanded that the speakers be re-installed, the authorities "warned them with consequences and punishment" (see below).

Ismailis in the capital Dushanbe gathered on 11 February at the Ismaili Centre for the online transmission of the homage ceremony for the Aga Khan V. "But Dushanbe City Administration turned off the electricity in the area where the prayer house is," Ismailis complained to Forum 18. When the prayer house workers tried to turn on the backup electric generator, the police present "warned them not to do so and threatened them with punishment unless they listen to them. And so the community could not watch the rest of the broadcast" (see below).

The regime cut off the electricity at 4pm, the exact time the ceremony began, exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18. Electricity was not restored until late evening. "Many believe this was a deliberate action by the authorities to disrupt the religious observance and further suppress Ismaili religious expression," they noted (see below).

An official of the Dushanbe city Department for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals – who would not give his name – claimed not to know that the electricity had been cut off to the Ismaili Centre and the Centre was banned from using its own generator. "I'm not informed about this," he told Forum 18. "Maybe it was for technical reasons" (see below).

An official at the Office of the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Umed Bobozoda refused to put Forum 18 through to him. He also refused to say if it had received any complaints over the regime's obstruction of the Khorog and Dushanbe events. Forum 18 asked Bobozoda in writing about the regime's violations of the rights to freedom of religion or belief of the Ismaili community. It received no response (see below).

The telephone of the Ombudsperson's Office representative in Khorugh, as well as of the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) in Dushanbe, went unanswered (see below).

The regime showed hostility to the Aga Khan IV. It banned him from further visits to Tajikistan after his 2012 visit. It demanded that people and the Ismaili Centres take down his portrait and removed a welcome slogan carved on a mountainside in Badakhshan. The regime banned annual celebrations in Badakhshan each 28 May to commemorate his first visit to the region in 1995. The regime censored part of his birthday message in December 2024. It ended the diplomatic status of his Foundation in October 2024 (see below).

Since 2022, the regime has systematically replaced leaders of Ismaili institutions appointed by the Aga Khan, including in the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB), the Ismaili Centre, jamatkhanas (prayer halls), and the National Council for Ismailis. The regime has opposed moves by the Imamate (the seat of the Aga Khan) to align Ismaili practice in the country with practices in the rest of the worldwide Ismaili community. The Imamate is trying to standardise religious rites, including those connected with marriage and funerals (see below).

Exiled Pamiri human rights defenders fear the regime's apparent goal is to create an Ismaili community separate from the Imamate led by the Aga Khan and the worldwide Ismaili community (see below).

The regime has also obstructed the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by Ismailis. Officials have banned the two Ismaili Centres – in Khorugh and Dushanbe - from conducting any educational or cultural activities. Officials have also banned Ismailis from holding prayer meetings in homes (see below).

The regime has forced independent khalifas (religious leaders) to resign and has detained and interrogated some of them. It has used charges of "sorcery" to fine dozens of khalifas, some of them more than once, for engaging in traditional healing practices, exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18. One religious leader, Muzaffar Davlatmirov, is in prison in Yavan serving a five-year term (see below).

After the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Nazila Ghanea visited Badakhshan in April 2023, she noted people's "widespread reluctance to speak for fear of reprisals" (see below).

Repression in Mountainous Badakhshan

The Ismaili branch of Shia Islam in Tajikistan is mainly found in Badakhshan in the Pamir Mountains, and the community worldwide is led by the Aga Khan, a direct descendent of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region (also known from Russian as Gorno-Badakhshan) has seen increasing repression by the regime since its forces killed a local resident in November 2021.

Prince Karim Al-Hussaini, the Aga Khan IV, was known for his philanthropy in Tajikistan and elsewhere in the world, where he built homes, hospitals and schools. He died in Lisbon on 4 February at the age of 88. Although Kyrgyzstan sent as its representative to his funeral in Lisbon on 8 February the deputy chair of the Cabinet of Ministers, Tajikistan sent no official representative.

Ismaili Muslims meet for worship in centres (which also host educational and cultural events), prayer houses, or private homes. The two Ismaili centres in Tajikistan - in Khorugh and in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe – remain open, but only for prayers. Officials have banned the centres from conducting any educational or cultural activities. Officials have also banned Ismailis from holding prayer meetings in homes.

At a January 2023 meeting, officials insisted that local people must remove portraits of the Ismaili spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, which hang in places of honour in homes. Officials had earlier complained of such portraits in the centre in Dushanbe. The Aga Khan IV was not allowed to visit Tajikistan after 2012 – the regime rejected his attempt to visit in 2017 during his Diamond Jubilee visits to Ismaili communities in more than 10 countries (see below).

Officials also said that young Ismailis would no longer be allowed to travel to Britain for education at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. The regime has long tried to prevent people of any faith from travelling abroad for religious education (see below).

In January 2023, the authorities in Mountainous Badakhshan Region banned voluntary lessons for secondary-school age children based on a course book published by the Aga Khan Foundation. The secret police seized copies of the Tajik-language set of course books, "Ethics and Knowledge".

"I have no instructions from the Ombudsperson to answer"

Forum 18 tried to reach the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Umed Bobozoda to ask why the regime is obstructing the exercise by Ismaili Muslims of the right to freedom of religion or belief. However, on 18 March an assistant – who did not give his name - refused to put Forum 18 through. The assistant initially claimed that "the law forbids" Bobozoda giving interviews. He then said: "No law forbids it, but he does not give interviews."

When Forum 18 listed some of the regime interference in commemorations surrounding the death of the Aga Khan IV and appointment of the Aga Khan V, the assistant dismissed suggestions that the cutting of the supply of electricity to the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe was targeted at the community. "Electricity is a problem in Tajikistan, especially in the winter," he told Forum 18.

The assistant insisted that "if we get complaints [of the violation of human rights] we process them". Asked how many complaints the Ombudsperson's Office has received over the regime obstructions to commemorations in February and other restrictions, he refused to say. "I have no instructions from the Ombudsperson to answer. Send your questions officially in writing."

Forum 18 wrote to Ombudsperson Bobozoda before the beginning of the working day in Dushanbe of 19 March listing the many violations of the rights of Ismailis to freedom of religion or belief and asking why these violations occur. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Dushanbe of 19 March.

The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) has found that the Human Rights Ombudsperson does not comply with the Paris Principles (<https://ganhri.org/accreditation/>) for national human rights institutions, as among other problems it is not independent of the regime.

The telephone of the Ombudsperson's Office representative in Khorugh went unanswered on 18 and 19 March.

Telephones at the regime's State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880) (SCRA) in Dushanbe went unanswered whenever Forum 18 called on 18 and 19 March.

Aga Khan commemoration obstructed in Khorugh

As hundreds of Ismaili Shia Muslims gathered on 5 February to mourn the Aga Khan's death in their officially registered Ismaili Centre in Khorugh, used also as a prayer house, many Ismailis had to stay outside the building due to lack of space, Ismailis who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 20 February.

"Soon National Security Committee (NSC) secret police officers and other officials arrived at the scene," an Ismaili told Forum 18. "They removed the loudspeakers put outside so that those who were not inside the building could hear those speaking inside, as well as the live broadcast of the ceremony of Prince Rahim the Aga Khan V being named as the new spiritual leader of the Ismailis."

When local people demanded that the speakers be re-installed, the authorities "warned them with consequences and punishment".

A human rights defender added that "when people in Khorugh gathered for the ceremonies it was minus 20 degrees Celsius outside, but they still came and stood there to listen and watch the broadcast".

Telephones at the Regional Police in Khorugh went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 19 March.

Regime disrupts homage ceremony in Dushanbe

The Ismaili community worldwide held a homage ceremony on 11 February for the 50th Imam, Aga Khan V. The ceremony was streamed online. However, the regime disrupted the ceremony at the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe.

"More than a hundred Ismailis gathered in the prayer house to watch the live broadcast of the ceremony. But Dushanbe City Administration turned off the electricity in the area where the prayer house is," Ismaili believers complained to Forum 18.

When the prayer house workers tried to turn on the backup electric generator, the police present "warned them not to do so and threatened them with punishment unless they listen to them. And so the community could not watch the rest of the broadcast."

The regime cut off the electricity at 4pm, the exact time the ceremony began, exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18. Electricity was not restored until late evening. "Many believe this was a deliberate action by the authorities to disrupt the religious observance and further suppress Ismaili religious expression," the exiled Pamiris noted.

An official of the Dushanbe city Department for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals – who would not give his name – claimed not to know that the electricity had been cut off to the Ismaili Centre on 11 February and the Centre was banned from using its own generator. "I'm not informed about this," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 19 March. "Maybe it was for technical reasons."

Told that Ismailis believe the move was deliberate to prevent their participation in the ceremony, the official responded: "Why turn off the electricity? No one has the right to turn off the electricity if an event is planned." He told Forum 18 that his office had received no complaints on this.

An official of Dushanbe city's Informational Department told Forum 18 on 19 March that it could not answer any questions as these had to be sent to the government.

The duty officer at Dushanbe city's Department of the NSC secret police put the phone down twice on 19 March when Forum 18 introduced itself and asked why electricity had been cut off to the Ismaili Centre on 11 February.

Why?

The Aga Khan Foundation has worked in Tajikistan since 1992, and has invested some one billion US dollars in the country's business, finance, healthcare and culture. Some 3,500 local people found employment in its various projects in Mountainous Badakhshan and elsewhere in Tajikistan.

Mountainous Badakhshan is a region with population of more than 230,000, and 90 per cent of the population identify themselves as Ismaili followers.

A human rights defender, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that the authorities obstructed the ceremonies related to the death of the Aga Khan IV and the appointment of the Aga Khan V because "they are jealous of the praise the Aga Khan received and receives today for his great free of charge help to the people of Tajikistan and for his spiritual leadership to the Ismailis. President [of Tajikistan, Emomali] Rahmon has very much been agitated by this because he wants to receive that praise."

The human rights defender noted the cold temperature in Khorugh when Ismailis gathered to mourn the Aga Khan's death, remarking: "Would they voluntarily come to watch a President Rahmon ceremony under such critical conditions? I do not think so. And this also demonstrates the spiritual zeal of the Ismaili people. Apparently, all this agitated the authorities and the President."

Pamir Inside, an independent Tajik news source, commented on 6 February that the authorities dictate to people how they should pray even in private and lamented that the authorities are "insensitive on such an important day for the Ismaili believers of Tajikistan".

Regime hostility to late Aga Khan

After several visits by the Aga Khan IV to Tajikistan, most recently in 2012, the regime did not allow him to make further visits. The regime rejected his attempt to visit in 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880) during his Diamond Jubilee visits to Ismaili communities in more than 10 countries.

Celebrations used to take place in Mountainous Badakhshan on 28 May to celebrate the Aga Khan's first visit to the region in 1995. During the celebrations the villagers used to dress up, dance outdoors to the accordion and drums, and sing religious songs describing the Aga Khan as their Nur (light). However, 2021 was the last year such celebrations were held unimpeded. Unrest in the region in 2022 disrupted the celebrations. The following year the regime banned further celebrations.

In 2019, the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880) (SCRA) wrote to the Aga Khan Foundation and the Ismaili Education Centre in Dushanbe. "We are concerned that colourful posters of Aga Khan around the buildings of prayer houses with slogans such as 'Welcome Our Imam', 'Happy Diamond Anniversary', 'We Love Our Imam' can be interpreted as a preference for the [Shia Muslim] Ismaili faith over the [state-controlled (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880)] Sunni faith, and for the Aga Khan over the Leader of the Nation [Emomali Rahmon]."

The SCRA also criticised similar slogans of support to the Aga Khan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880) on his Diamond Jubilee in 2017 in a 2019 letter to Badakhshan's regional authorities.

One night in June 2022, security forces destroyed the giant Ismaili flag and the letters "Welcome our Imam", which had been carved into the mountains above the Badakhshan regional capital Khorugh in 2007, when the Aga Khan celebrated his Golden Jubilee. It was replaced with the slogan "Tajikistan, ahead!" which is connected to President Rahmon.

At a January 2023 meeting in Khorugh, officials insisted that local people must remove portraits of the Aga Khan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880), which hang in places of honour in homes.

The Aga Khan IV used to send farmans (religious directives) each year on his birthday, 13 December. An NSC secret police official overseeing religious affairs ordered censorship of his message of 13 December 2024. The official ordered parts of the message to be removed before it was read out in Dushanbe and Khorugh, exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18.

The authorities removed the greetings section of the farman, which included both the traditional Muslim greeting and the general salutation that began with "My beloved Jamat" and addressed the President of the National Council for Ismailis.

"The term 'President' was likely the key reason for this alteration," an exiled Pamiri told Forum 18. "In Tajikistan, the regime is highly sensitive to any titles or figures that might suggest an alternative authority to the state. Given that there is only one recognised president in the country, the authorities likely saw the use of the word 'President' in a religious or community leadership context as a potential challenge, however symbolic, to their centralised control."

Tajikistan refused to extend agreement with Aga Khan Foundation

An official Agreement between the Aga Khan Development Foundation and Tajikistan regulated its diplomatic status and charitable activities in the country. When it expired on 31 October 2024, the Tajik authorities refused to extend it.

Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Mukhriddinov informed the Foundation that "From now on the foundation's activities will continue as of a non-profit (non-governmental organisation) without diplomatic status", unnamed officials told Pamir Inside on 18 November 2024.

Justice Minister Muzaffar Ashuriyon confirmed the ending of the Foundation's diplomatic status at a press conference only on 13 February 2025.

Alisher Nematzoda, head of the Justice Ministry's International Legal Department, said the government had decided to end the Foundation's diplomatic status. The Foreign Ministry had communicated this to the Justice Ministry and it had carried out the instruction. Asked whether the NSC secret police or other government agencies had initiated the decision, Nematzoda responded: "I don't know."

"The Foundation now functions as a non-governmental organisation," Nematzoda told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 19 March.

"If previously (..) the collaboration was on the Foreign Ministry level, now the foundation will have to work with various structures of the government," a source told Pamir Inside in November 2024. "This will significantly complicate the foundation's charity work, create great obstacles for it and will deprive them of the minimal protection against state control, which they had before."

State pressure on the Foundation's activity began after the authorities suppressed civil protests in Mountainous Badakhshan in 2021 and 2022. The authorities confiscated properties of the Foundation and closed down its various projects, including the Aga Khan Lycee (private high school), Serena hotel, Chorbog city park serviced by the Foundation, several private kindergarten and administrative buildings.

According to unconfirmed reports from Badakhshan "several imprisoned leaders of the Pamiris [indigenous people of Badakhshan] were tortured in prison to give false witness against the Foundation .. but they refused to do so."

State takeover of Ismaili institutions?

Since 2022, the regime has systematically replaced leaders of Ismaili institutions appointed by the Aga Khan, including in the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB), the Ismaili Centre, jamatkhana (prayer halls), and the National Council for Ismailis.

ITREB's Executive Director was forced to resign following government threats. The replacement, Nazirov, is believed to have strong regime links. Mahrami Anvarzod was appointed in 2024 to head the Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe without approval from the Aga Khan, exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18. At the same time, the NSC secret police stepped up surveillance of jamatkhana (prayer halls) in Khorugh and Dushanbe.

The NSC secret police monitors all communications between Ismaili institutions and the Imamate in Lisbon, the seat of the Aga Khan.

From 2024, the regime introduced new controls on donations local Ismailis make to jamatkhana as part of their religious obligations. Ismailis from Tajikistan working as labour migrants in Russia also often donate to jamatkhana through their families. These donations have been held in Aga Khan Development Foundation accounts, but the regime has been trying to gain control of these, exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18.

The regime has opposed moves by the Imamate to align Ismaili practice in the country with practices in the rest of the worldwide Ismaili community. The Imamate is trying to standardise religious rites, including those connected with marriage and funerals.

Those the regime has appointed to key positions opposed these reforms. Umed Mamadsherzodshoyev, appointed as chair of ITREB in Badakhshan, is known as a vocal critic of the reforms. Exiled Pamiri human rights defenders fear that his appointment could be a step towards the regime's apparent goal of creating an Ismaili community separate from the Imamate led by the Aga Khan and the worldwide Ismaili community.

Crackdown on independent Pamiri khalifas

The regime has increased control over Pamiri khalifas, who lead local religious and cultural life, exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18. The regime insists that only state-approved khalifas can operate and is pressuring them to link to the state-controlled Sunni Muslim authorities, even though Ismailis are part of a different strand of Islam.

The regime is also pressuring and offering financial support for khalifas to join the annual haj pilgrimage to Mecca in an apparent bid to draw them closer to the state-controlled Sunni Muslim community. Ismailis do not regard undertaking the haj as a religious obligation.

Khalifas are not allowed to perform the traditional healing rituals, such as writing prayers or verses on birch bark or special paper. "As of last December, only two khalifas were allowed to do this practice in the whole of Badakhshan, and now even they have been banned," exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18. "According to some sources, even their books have been confiscated."

The regime has forced independent khalifas to resign and has detained and interrogated some of them. It has used charges of "sorcery" to fine dozens of khalifas, some of them more than once, for engaging in traditional healing practices.

Khalifas have been punished under Administrative Code Article 482. This punishes "Engaging in witchcraft and fortune telling" with fines of 80 to 100 Financial Units (6,000 to 7,500 Somonis since 1 January 2025) or 10 to 15 days in prison. The punishments were increased in Administrative Code amendments of 20 June 2024.

What about imprisoned Imam Muzaffar Davlatmirov?

An Ismaili religious leader in Khorugh, Muzaffar Vafonazarovich Davlatmirov (born 6 July 1963), remains in prison in Yavan in the south-western Khatlon Region, exiled Pamiri human rights defenders told Forum 18 in early March.

On 26 July 2022 the NSC secret police arrested Davlatmirov. Just eight days later, on 3 August, Badakhshan Regional Court handed him a five-year general regime prison sentence (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782) under Criminal Code Article 307-1 ("Public calls for extremist activity"), Part 2 ("committed using the mass media or the internet"). This article has been used by the regime to target a variety of Muslims. "Davlatmirov is not an extremist, and did not call for 'extremist' activity," a local person who knows him told Forum 18.

Local Ismailis told Forum 18 in early 2025 that they are not aware of what is going with Davlatmirov in prison. "Even if somebody knows something they will not talk about this to others," the human rights defender told Forum 18. "People are so afraid even to talk to each other that they see spies of the authorities in others. They believe that Rahmon is watching them everywhere inside and outside Tajikistan."

Prisoner of conscience Davlatmirov's prison address is:

Tajikistan

735310 Viloyati Xatlon

Shahri Yavan

kuchai M. Karomov 1a

Muassisai Islohii YaS 3/6

Davlatmirov Muzaffar Vafonazarovich

"Widespread reluctance to speak for fear of reprisals"

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Nazila Ghanea noted the authorities' violations of the rights to freedom of religion or belief of Ismailis and tried to find out more during her April 2023 visit to Tajikistan. She visited Mountainous Badakhshan from 15 to 18 April 2023, but was obstructed in her attempts.

"As the Special Rapporteur's visit request had clearly indicated her strong interest in visiting that Province, she very much regrets that the authorities did not facilitate official meetings and she was thus unable to meet the authorities there," Ghanea noted in her subsequent report, issued on 18 January 2024 (A/HRC/55/47/Add.1 (<https://docs.un.org/A/HRC/55/47/ADD.1>)). "While her delegation reached out to a range of religious and belief communities and faith-based actors in the Province, it was met with widespread reluctance to speak for fear of reprisals." (END)

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

For background information, see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880)

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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