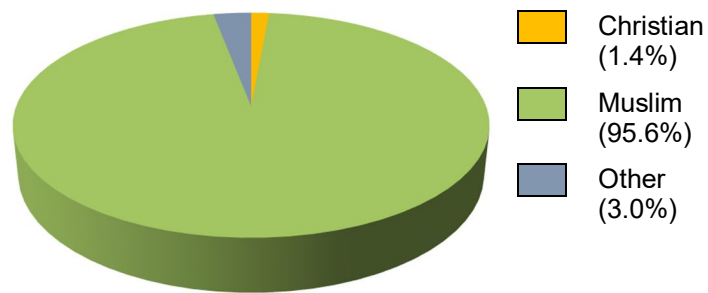


TAJIKISTAN



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
143,100 km ²	7.1 million	Democracy / Autocracy	Tajik Uzbek, Russian ¹

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Tajikistan is the smallest of the five Central Asian republics, with widespread poverty, a weak economy and deeply entrenched corruption.

The government of President Emomali Rahmon, Head of State since 1992, has been marked by numerous human rights violations and by scant respect for the rule of law. He is now attempting to tighten his already strong grip on the country – with an increased emphasis on the spread of Islamic extremism as the most common justification for repressing dissent and restricting political, civil and religious rights.² In the 2015 Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Tajikistan was moved from Level 2 (where it had been since 2009) to Level 1 (as a country of particular concern).³ Freedom House, in its Report 2015, also points to a decline in Tajikistan in the level of democracy achieved.⁴

In the elections to the lower house, held on 1st March 2015 and marked by numerous irregularities, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) – the only religion-based party in Central Asia – did not reach the five percent threshold and so, for the first time in 15 years, it does not have a single representative in the Tajik parliament. Two days before the elections, the State Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), the principal control body for the various religious communities in the country – which operates under presidential administration – had redacted and sent out to all the central mosques a sermon attacking the IRP and calling on the people to vote only for the candidates of President Rahmon's own party. Following the elections, another similar tract, authored by the CRA, called for the outlawing of the IRP.⁵ This is what has in fact happened, initially with a government decree on 28th August 2015, banning the IRP from engaging in any political activity, and then, on 29th September 2015, with the definitive outlawing of the IRP by the Supreme Court, which defined the party as an "extremist and terrorist organisation".⁶ In the wake of this ruling, many of the members, including leading figures in the party, have been arrested.⁷

The absence of the IRP from the parliament and from the civil life of the country, and hence the denial of political representation to the 44,000 registered members of the party, along with its many other supporters, has been seen by political analysts as a potential source of growth in Islamic

radicalism.⁸

In June 2015 the Interior Minister Ramazan Rakhimzoda stated that the number of Tajiks fighting in Syria and Iraq has been steadily growing, reaching around 500 individuals.⁹

The current legislation on religion, which came into force in 2009, regards all exercise of religious freedom as illegal, except where authorised by the state. All religious groups are required to register, and there is a strict system of censorship. Further legal obstacles in the exercise of religious freedom have been introduced subsequently, with amendments to the civil and penal code and the law on parental responsibility of 2011 – which bans the participation of young people aged under 18 in religious activities, with the exception of funerals. Also worth noting in this context is the law on extremism, which is frequently used to justify coercive action against forms of Islam not approved by the state.

Freedom of information is likewise heavily restricted. In November 2015 parliament approved certain amendments to the law against terrorism, thereby legalising the severing of telephone and Internet communications.¹⁰ In July 2015 a presidential decree ruled that all media outlets reporting official and government news could only do so with reference to the Khovar state information service.¹¹

Incidents

State control over the Islamic communities – which in any case cannot exist unless they belong to the Council of the Ulema, a body with close ties to the central government – is all-pervasive. The imams are all state employees,¹² and the state also decrees the maximum number of mosques.

Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) has been allowed to keep its doors open. At the beginning of 2014, the CRA likewise prepared and circulated to all the mosques in the country a manual containing 45 topics that must be covered in their sermons.¹³ The ban on girls covering their heads in school remains in force, as does the ban on women and young people aged under 18 attending the mosques. On 13th April 2015 the CRA banned all individuals under 35 from undertaking the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, citing the 20 percent reduction in the quota set for Tajikistan as the reason. However, many people think it is yet another government restriction to prevent young Tajiks from making contact while abroad with radical ideas or extremist groups.¹⁴

During the last year there have been numerous measures implemented by the state to marginalise the role of Islam in public life and restrict public expressions of religious devotion. In October 2015, for example, the authorities in Tajikistan banned all state employees from participating in Friday prayers.¹⁵

The government has also pursued a campaign against tendencies it considers “alien and contrary to Tajik culture”, and in particular against the adoption of Islamic cultural practices. In this connection President Rahmon – obviously referring to the hijab – criticised “those women and girls who go about in black clothes that do not belong to Tajik culture or tradition, with the intent to disseminate radical ideas”.¹⁶

Subsequent to this, the first Vice Minister for internal affairs, Abdurahmon Alamshozoda, instructed the police to pay particular attention to women wearing “foreign clothing” and many traders involved in selling the hijab were ordered to stop selling this type of clothing.¹⁷

Around about the same time, in March and April, a campaign began against men wearing beards, with various incidents reported of the police detaining Muslim men and forcibly shaving off their beards, ordering them not to grow them again. In the region of Khatlon alone, the police claimed to have shaved the beards of more than 13,000 men, as part of a “campaign against radicalisation.”¹⁸

On 28th August a student by the name of Umar Bobojonov was arrested in Vakhdat for having publicly displayed a long beard and was beaten so violently that he was left in a coma for a week, after which time – according to local media – he died on 3rd September.¹⁹

On 13th January 2016 the lower chamber of parliament in Tajikistan passed a law making it illegal to give new-born children non-Tajik names, banning in particular foreign or Islamic-sounding names.²⁰ The committee for language and terminology at the Academy of Sciences is now apparently drawing up a list of 4,000 names that are considered “suitable”.

Many people fear that the severe tightening of the screws initiated by President Rahmon in order to check the radicalisation of Tajik society will have exactly the opposite effect. According to the Tajik expert, Faredun Hodizoda, “These actions and bans are a weapon that will undoubtedly be made use of by those seeking to promote jihad, in order to provoke a reaction.”²¹

There have been many arrests of independent Islamic groups or those regarded as extremist. In December 2014 a court in Khujand, the second city of Tajikistan, sentenced 11 men for membership of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which is banned in Tajikistan, to terms ranging from nine to 19 years imprisonment.²²

On 8th December 2014 the Supreme Court declared Salafist Muslims to be “extremists”.²³ From the end of 2014 to the first few months of 2015, over 30 followers of Salafi Islam were sentenced to prison terms of two to 10 years, or fines equivalent to \$US10,000, for having followed a banned branch of Islam.²⁴

In May 2015 a court in the northern region of Sughd sentenced 10 men to eight and a half years in prison each for being members of *Jamaat Ansarullah*, another Islamic group banned in 2006. In February 2015, in the same region, in the town of Istaravshan, another 13 men were sentenced to long prison terms (from nine to 12 years) for the same offence.²⁵

In September 2015 14 men were arrested in the town of Nurek for having unfurled an ISIS flag; the previous month a group of adolescents were arrested in Shahrtuz for the same offence.²⁶

In July 2015, following a court ruling, some 80 Islamic websites were outlawed; a list of them was published on the website of the Tajik Interior Ministry.²⁷

For all religious groups in the country, international contacts are severely limited. Since the beginning of 2015, the CRA has constantly refused the requests from various registered groups for permission to invite their co-religionists from abroad to take part in religious events. In July 2015 the Russian Orthodox Church was refused permission to invite two Orthodox scholars from Uzbekistan to take part in a conference. No reasons were given for the refusal.²⁸ Other religious communities have had similar problems.²⁹ Sadly, the approval of the CRA is necessary even to invite a foreign person as a guest to one’s own community, without this necessarily involving any

kind of religious celebration. Otherwise their mere presence during the liturgy can be interpreted by the authorities as illegal religious activity.

Giving religious instruction without the relevant state licence is a prosecutable offence. In December 2014 two Muslims – Komiljon Akhrorov and Sayidmumin Rashidov – were arrested in Vahdat for having taught the *Qur'an* and Islam to school-aged children in their own homes.³⁰

In July 2015, in the region of Sogd, the police raided the apartment of a Jehovah's Witness, Nazira Oripova, where 12 believers were gathered to pray and study the Bible. Eight of the 12 people involved were charged with the illegal teaching of religion in a private apartment. The Jehovah's Witnesses, who were banned in 2007, have tried without success to regain state registration. The CRA turned down their request for registration for the third time in September 2014.

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

The last year has seen a progressive deterioration with regard to general liberties, including religious freedom, with ever-stricter controls imposed by the state.

¹ Data source: BBC

² The Diplomat, 15 September 2015

³ Annual Report 2015, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

⁴ The Diplomat, 24 June 2015

⁵ Forum 18 News Service, 1 April 2015

⁶ The Diplomat, 2 October 2015 and Interfax Religion, 29 September 2015

⁷ Forum 18 News Service, 25 September 2015

⁸ The Diplomat, 2 October 2015

⁹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 29 October 2015

¹⁰ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 November 2015

¹¹ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 20 July 2015

¹² Interfax Religion, 22 January 2014

¹³ Asia-Plus, 14 January 2014

¹⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 14 April 2015

¹⁵ Eurasianet, 13 October 2015

¹⁶ Forum 18 News Service, 1 April 2015

¹⁷ Eurasianet 1 April 2015

¹⁸ BBC, 21 January 2016: Tajikistan's battle against beards to 'fight radicalisation'

¹⁹ The Diplomat, 15 September 2015

²⁰ Eurasianet, 13 January 2016

²¹ Forum 18 News Service, 6 May 2015

²² Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 19 December 2014

²³ Forum 18 News Service, 21 January 2015

²⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 11 December 2014; Interfax Religion, 19 June 2015; Annual Report 2014, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

²⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 4 May 2015

²⁶ The Diplomat, 1 September 2015

²⁷ Interfax Religion, 6 July 2015.

²⁸ Forum 18 News Service, 7 January 2016

²⁹ Forum 18 News Service, 25 September 2015

³⁰ Forum 18 News Service, 21 January 2015