



Forum 18 www.forum18.org

Twitter [@Forum_18](https://twitter.com/Forum_18)

Facebook [@Forum18NewsService](https://www.facebook.com/Forum18NewsService)

Forum 18 provides truthful, original, detailed, and accurate monitoring and analysis of violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, occupied Ukrainian territory, and Belarus. We also provide analyses on freedom of religion and belief in Turkey.

1. Tajikistan restricts freedom of religion and belief, with interlinked freedoms of expression, association and assembly. The Religion Law with various amendments makes all exercise of freedom of religion or belief with others without state permission illegal. Among the other restrictions imposed by the Law are: multiple obstacles to gaining state registration, such as state review of beliefs and rituals; restrictions on the number and type of permitted mosques; tight controls on religious education; censorship; religious organisations must report all their activity to the state; the state must approve all imams; and state control both on religious education at home, and on those travelling abroad for such education. "The Law represents total control and is unjust," one human rights defender told Forum 18.

Steadily increasing restrictions

2. The regime has steadily increased restrictions on exercising freedom of religion and belief. In 2020 alone: a new Law on the System of Warning Against and Prevention of Violations of the Law by Minors reinforced the existing ban on under-18-year-olds being involved in the exercise of freedom of religion and belief; a vaguely worded Countering Extremism Law which, among other things, restated existing State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) priorities as including "carrying out the unmasking of and warning against the activity of unregistered religious associations"; Administrative Code changes significantly increasing the fines for several freedom of religion and belief-related "offences" such as exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission; and further Criminal and Administrative Code changes targeting the unclear concept of "inciting hatred or dissension".

Jailing "extremist" prisoners of conscience

3. The regime repeatedly uses alleged "extremism" to jail people exercising their freedom of religion and belief. In July 2017 Protestant Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov was jailed for three years for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'". The jailing followed raids on congregations affiliated to his Church. Officials closed the Konibodom congregation in March 2017 after interrogating and torturing church members, and NSC secret police officers pressured employers into firing church members. The authorities sealed Sunmin Sunbogym's two buildings - in Konibodom and Khujand - which have both been left empty since the raids. "People are afraid to go to church because of what happened," a Protestant told Forum 18 in 2020.

4. In February 2019, officials arrested 68-year-old Jehovah's Witness Shamil Khakimov (born 30 January 1951) after raids on Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for worship. He was prosecuted for literature, photos, videos, audios, computer files and mobile phone data seized from him and other community members. During interrogations lasting between 20 minutes and 14 hours, police tortured people and forced them to sign statements that they were not tortured. Among the evidence in Khakimov's trial was a "state religious expert analysis" of a Tajik translation of the Bible commissioned by the NSC secret police and conducted by three local Imams. Among other things it

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." Prisoner of conscience Khakimov was in September 2019 jailed for seven years, six months. On his release in May 2024, when he would be 73, Khakimov will be deprived of the right to participate in any religious organisations until May 2027. His medical condition is now serious (see below).

5. On 12 February 2021 Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov (known as Mullo Sirojiddin) was jailed for five years and six months, along with an unknown number of others. The arrests followed a November 2020 NSC secret police raid on his flat when he was teaching a small group about Islam. The NSC also confiscated the Imam's religious books and computer. He had in 2020 posted videos on YouTube dealing with how to live as a Muslim. Muslims and human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, unanimously stated that the imam is a moderate preacher who did not criticise the regime. One human rights defender suggested that "the main purpose of arresting Imam Abdurahmanov was to allow only state-appointed and approved imams to speak publicly. Most independent imams are now afraid to speak publicly. The regime is struggling for the hearts and minds of people". Neither the NSC nor the judge was prepared to explain the reasons for prisoner of conscience Abdurahmanov's jailing, or who else was jailed.

6. Independent journalist Daler Sharipov, arrested in January 2020, was jailed on 16 April 2020 for one year for allegedly "extremist" articles. A human rights defender stated that "there is absolutely no malice or incitement there to religious hatred". He was released on 29 January 2021 after completing his sentence.

Jailing conscientious objectors to military service

7. Military service of two years is compulsory for young men between the ages of 16 and 27. Despite repeated requests from the UN Human Rights Committee and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the regime offers no genuinely civilian alternative service, and conscientious objectors are jailed.

8. The latest jailed conscientious objector is Rustamjon Norov, a 22-year-old Jehovah's Witness who had offered to perform alternative civilian service and was jailed on 7 January 2021 for three and a half years. The court which jailed him allowed as a prosecution "witness" Russian Orthodox Sister Feodora Vlasova. She claimed "it is the sacred duty of Christians to serve in the Armed Forces of their country". Neither the court nor Vlasova would explain why her personal views are relevant to a case she has no connection with.

Arresting and jailing returning Muslims

9. Officials have arrested and jailed Muslims returning to Tajikistan who are accused of exercising freedom of religion and belief in ways the regime dislikes. Nearly a year after his February 2019 return to Tajikistan and amnesty, on 2 January 2020 35-year-old Sadriddin Mulloyev was jailed for 12 years. Prosecutors accused him as a former member of the banned Tablighi Jamaat Muslim missionary movement, and of support for the activities of mercenaries. His family rejects all the charges. The trial was held in secret, and officials prevented Mulloyev from having contact with his lawyer or his family.

Ignoring Mandela Rules

10. Prison authorities have repeatedly denied prisoner of conscience Shamil Khakimov (see above) the specialised medical treatment he needs. A retired widower, he had major leg surgery not long before his arrest, suffers from high blood pressure, and has had coronavirus symptoms. In January 2021, prison authorities sent Khakimov from the prison medical unit back to ordinary cells, where

prisoners have verbally attacked him for having "a leg which smells like rotten meat". Prison governor Farukh Jalolov told Forum 18: "I do not know what the Mandela Rules are." He claimed Khakimov was not hospitalised when he had coronavirus symptoms as: "He just had a cold and that is all. The rest is lies."

11. Prison authorities have banned Khakimov from reading the Bible openly, or having conversations about God and his faith. Relatives of Muslim prisoners of conscience have told Forum 18 that their relatives are allowed to pray openly, but not to read the Koran.

12. The prison administration, Khujand Prosecutor's Office, and Khujand City Court have rejected legal appeals to free Khakimov, giving contradictory reasons. The Supreme Court and Sugd Regional Court both claimed an unspecified "technical mistake" and, illegally, neither court provided a copy of its decision. Haydar Kodyrov, Head of the Supreme Court International Section, told Forum 18: "I am not aware of the Mandela Rules."

Impunity for torture

13. Impunity for multiple instances of torture of Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants continues. Officials refuse to explain why the regime ignores obligations under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to arrest suspect torturers and put them on criminal trial for torture.

14. Recent torture victims have included Nilufar Rajabova, who was arrested with other Muslim women in December 2019 for wearing a hijab. Dushanbe's Sino District Deputy Police Chief Lieutenant Colonel Mashrafi Islamzoda hit her repeatedly, causing Rajabova to fall down and be unable to walk. Officials also threatened to severely physically assault her mother in front of her. Similarly, conscientious objector and prisoner of conscience Jovidon Bobojonov was tortured in 2020 when he refused to wear military uniform and take the military oath of allegiance. Six soldiers twisted his arms behind his back, forced him to the ground, and Bobojonov's head was pressed with an army boot to the floor. Soldiers also kneeled on his neck. When he tried to resist, they beat him in the kidneys. The more he resisted, the more pressure to his neck was applied by soldiers' knees.

15. Impunity for officials is a pattern in torture cases, including over the torture of Jehovah's Witnesses in February 2019 in Khujand and Konibodom, and of Sunmin Sunbogym Church members in Konibodom in March 2017 after the Church was raided, forcibly closed, and members were fired from their jobs.

Anti-hijab and anti-beard wearing campaigns

16. After March 2015 parliamentary elections, President Rahmon condemned women wearing "uncharacteristic" dress. 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. Also in March 2015, police began forcibly shaving bearded Muslim men throughout the country.

17. Women are particularly targeted. One human rights defender told Forum 18 that "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 Ministry claimed to Forum 18 that it "is not responsible for hospitals".

18. 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 (see above). Rajabova

was fined about two weeks' average wages for those in formal work for allegedly insulting a state official. After two appeals, Judge Takhmina Valizoda of Dushanbe City Court upheld the fine. The Judge would not explain 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

19. Perhaps because Islam is the majority faith – and so a particular target for a regime hostile to everything outside state control – Muslims face special restrictions. These include strict bans on non-state-controlled mosques, control over the number and size of mosques, and the forcible closure of mosques. In 2018 the SCRA claimed that 1,938 mosques were forcibly closed in 2017 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."

20. Mosque closures continue. In Khujand officials confiscated the Nuri Islom 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?" 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 official would not explain to Forum 18 why community members wanted to close their own mosque.

21. Mosque-goers are closely monitored, including with surveillance cameras in mosques. Notices at the entrances of mosques around the country warn that attendees can pray only according to Hanafi rules. The regime has banned Salafi Muslims, SCRA Deputy Head Mavlon Mukhtarov claiming 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".

22. Mosques "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."

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

23. The Traditions Law imposes numerous restrictions on freedom of religion and belief and interlinked human rights, including: the banning of the normal celebratory meals to honour pilgrims returning from the haj; and requiring everyone to respect an undefined "national dress", which Kobiljon Abdukodirov of Parliament's Legal Department confirmed is a de facto ban on wearing the hijab and other so-called "non-traditional" religious apparel.

24. 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. State employees have been banned from attending Friday prayers and sermons, even during their lunch hour. On Friday 1 September 2017, a public holiday to celebrate the Muslim festival Id al-Adha, teachers and schoolchildren were forced to attend schools and not attend mosques. One Dushanbe Imam, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that the Council of Ulems instructed them to make the announcement "since children are banned from participation in religious activity".

25. Also in September 2017, the SCRA and the state-controlled Council of Ulems issued detailed regulations on how Muslims can grieve for the dead. These include bans on "crying and wailing

loudly”, and wearing black clothes while mourning. 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.

26. 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".

Rights of the child

27. The authorities forcibly closed all madrassahs (Islamic religious schools) after a 2013 speech by President Rahmon, and the Parental Responsibility Law among other things bans the participation of anyone below the age of 18 in religious events apart from funerals. This is enforced. For example in December 2018, after Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayevev of the SCRA saw children under 10 with their parents, he “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 fined almost eight months' average wage.

Intrusive reporting requirements, financial contributions demanded

28. The SCRA requires religious communities with state permission to exist to complete a detailed questionnaire every year. Officials are particularly interested in community finances, and in whether children under the age of 10 attend meetings. Among the many questions, the form requires detailed information on international contacts, and on financial donations to state-controlled “charitable activities”. Communities understand that they will suffer if they do not make them. The country ranks poorly in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index.

29. One religious community in early 2019 asked Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayevev, 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."

Censorship

30. Administrative Code Article 474-1 punishes producing, distributing, importing or exporting religious literature and items of a religious nature which have not passed compulsory prior state censorship. 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". Censorship also includes the internet via the State Communications Agency ordering mobile phone companies and internet providers to block specified websites. (END)