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ISLAM, STATE POWER, AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN TAJIKISTAN

Since gaining independence in 1991, Tajikistan has developed one of the most restrictive systems of state control over religious life in the post-Soviet region. Although the overwhelming majority of the country's population identifies as Muslim, the government of President Emomali Rahmon has increasingly viewed independent religious activity as a potential challenge to political stability and state authority. Drawing upon security concerns rooted in the legacy of the 1992–1997 civil war and the global discourse surrounding religious extremism, the authorities have implemented a wide range of policies aimed at regulating, monitoring, and restricting Islamic practice. These measures have included the closure of mosques and religious schools, limitations on religious education, bans on visible manifestations of faith such as hijabs and beards, extensive surveillance of religious communities, criminal prosecutions on allegations of extremism, and severe restrictions on religious expression.

Human rights organizations, independent journalists, and international observers have documented numerous cases involving arbitrary detention, torture, physical abuse, and other forms of mistreatment directed against devout Muslims, members of independent Islamic movements, and individuals whose religious beliefs fall outside state-approved interpretations of Islam. The cumulative effect of these policies has been the creation of an increasingly restrictive environment in which the open practice of Islam frequently exposes individuals to official scrutiny, coercive measures, and serious violations of fundamental rights.

A substantial proportion of Tajikistan's devout Muslim population consists of younger individuals who received religious education at prominent Islamic institutions abroad, including the International Islamic University in Islamabad, as well as universities and religious academies

in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, and other Muslim-majority countries. Many belong to a generation that came of age after the conclusion of Tajikistan's civil war and sought advanced religious training outside the country due to the limited opportunities for independent Islamic education within Tajikistan itself. The average age of these individuals is relatively young, often around thirty years old, placing them within a demographic group that has attracted particular scrutiny from the authorities.

The official position of the Tajik government has long been that devout Muslims, particularly those whose religious beliefs, practices, or affiliations fall outside state-approved interpretations of Islam, may pose a potential threat to national security and political stability. This perception is deeply rooted in the legacy of the 1992–1997 civil war, during which government forces confronted the United Tajik Opposition, a coalition that included democratic reformers, regional groups, and Islamist movements. The experience of the civil war continues to shape the worldview of the ruling elite under President Emomali Rahmon, who has repeatedly emphasized the dangers of religious extremism and political Islam as justification for extensive state regulation of religious life.

In practice, the authorities frequently treat independent religious activity as a potential source of political opposition. Individuals whose religious views diverge from officially sanctioned interpretations of Islam are often viewed with suspicion by state institutions. Government officials have repeatedly expressed concern regarding Tajik citizens who have studied religion abroad, particularly in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and other countries associated in official discourse with nontraditional or foreign religious influences. Such individuals are often portrayed as vulnerable to radicalization, susceptible to foreign ideological influence, and insufficiently loyal to the secular state. As a result, many devout Muslims become

subject to heightened surveillance, repeated questioning, monitoring of their religious activities, and other forms of official scrutiny.

Human rights organizations, independent journalists, and civil society activists have documented numerous cases involving arbitrary detention, physical abuse, coercive interrogation, torture, and other forms of mistreatment directed against devout Muslims and individuals associated with Islamic political movements. Reports indicate that security services regularly employ heavy-handed tactics when dealing with persons suspected of possessing independent religious influence or maintaining connections to Islamic organizations viewed unfavorably by the state.

Particularly illustrative are cases involving members and supporters of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which for many years functioned as the country's most significant Islamic-oriented political organization. Supporters of the party have repeatedly alleged that party members were subjected to severe pressure, intimidation, arbitrary detention, and physical abuse. In July 2012, during a large-scale security operation in Khorog, the administrative center of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, authorities detained Sherik Karamkhudoyev, a local leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party. His family later discovered that he had been transferred to a detention facility operated by the State Committee for National Security in Dushanbe. According to reports provided by his relatives and legal representatives, Karamkhudoyev was subjected to substantial pressure while in custody. His attorney subsequently requested an independent medical examination, arguing that injuries observed on his client were inconsistent with the official explanation provided by the authorities and instead appeared indicative of physical abuse while detained.

The same security operation resulted in the death of Sabzali Mamadrizoev, a prominent leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party's branch in Gorno-Badakhshan. According to colleagues

and associates, Mamadrizoev had openly criticized government policies and advocated for greater political pluralism. His death generated significant controversy, with supporters maintaining that he was deliberately targeted because of his political and religious activities. The incident became emblematic of broader concerns regarding the use of force by Tajik security services against individuals perceived as influential independent voices within religious and political communities.

Further allegations emerged in August 2013 when Muslima Broimshoeva, acting head of the Islamic Renaissance Party in Gorno-Badakhshan, publicly accused the authorities of exerting systematic pressure upon party members. In an interview with the BBC Russian Service, she described the case of party activist Asror Bulbulov, who allegedly informed her that he was being subjected to intense pressure by state authorities. According to Broimshoeva, Bulbulov appeared visibly distressed, expressed fear regarding his future, and believed that criminal proceedings could be initiated against him because of his political and religious activities. Such accounts reinforced concerns among observers that state institutions were increasingly employing intimidation and coercion against individuals associated with independent Islamic movements.

Violence directed against opposition figures extended beyond detention facilities and security operations. In April 2013, Makhmadali Khait, Deputy Chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party, was violently attacked in the entrance hall of his apartment building in Dushanbe. Khait, then fifty-six years old, sustained serious injuries, including cranial trauma and multiple bodily injuries that required hospitalization. The attack occurred amid increasing tensions between the government and opposition forces and was widely viewed by supporters and observers as part of a broader pattern of hostility directed toward prominent political and religious figures critical of the authorities. The failure to establish accountability in such cases

further contributed to concerns regarding the willingness of state institutions to protect individuals associated with opposition movements and independent religious activity. Taken collectively, these incidents illustrate a broader pattern in which devout Muslims, independent religious figures, and members of Islamic-oriented political organizations face heightened vulnerability to state scrutiny, coercive measures, arbitrary detention, physical abuse, and other serious violations of fundamental rights. They also demonstrate the extent to which concerns about national security, religious extremism, and political stability have been employed by the Tajik authorities to justify far-reaching restrictions on religious expression, independent political activity, and civic participation.

The campaign directed against visible manifestations of religious observance in Tajikistan has frequently reached extraordinary and deeply troubling levels. One of the most prominent features of state policy has been the systematic effort to eliminate public expressions of Islamic identity, particularly beards worn by men and hijabs worn by women. Over the past decade, the authorities have devoted substantial resources to regulating personal appearance, treating outward signs of religious observance as indicators of political unreliability, religious extremism, or opposition to the secular state. As a result, many devout Muslims have found themselves subjected to harassment, detention, humiliation, and coercive measures solely because of their appearance.

The authorities' efforts to suppress visible expressions of Islamic identity have been particularly evident in their treatment of bearded men. Beginning in the early 2010s, police and security services conducted repeated operations targeting individuals who wore beards associated with religious observance. In December 2010 and January 2011 alone, police in Dushanbe reportedly detained dozens of bearded Muslim men, photographed and fingerprinted them, and instructed them to shave their beards. Witnesses reported that officers frequently acted with

hostility and contempt. One resident of Dushanbe described attempting to explain that he had no connection to any prohibited religious organizations and came from a secular family, only to be insulted by police officers who referred to him and others like him as parasites who had flooded the city. Such incidents illustrate how official suspicion toward devout Muslims frequently manifests itself through degrading treatment and public humiliation.

Reports indicate that some police officers openly acknowledged receiving verbal instructions from their superiors requiring them to stop, identify, and investigate men with beards and women wearing hijabs. These practices reflected an informal but widespread policy aimed at discouraging visible manifestations of religious devotion. The result was the creation of an atmosphere in which ordinary believers increasingly feared attracting official attention merely because of their appearance.

The campaign intensified significantly in subsequent years. During the summer of 2014, authorities reportedly detained more than two hundred bearded Muslim men throughout the country, with dozens forcibly shaved against their will. What initially appeared to be sporadic incidents gradually evolved into a systematic state policy directed against visible religious observance. The authorities justified these actions as part of broader efforts to combat extremism and preserve secularism, yet critics argued that they represented a direct assault on personal autonomy, religious freedom, and human dignity.

One particularly striking account was published by the Tajik Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in June 2014. According to the victim, he was walking through a marketplace in Khujand when a vehicle stopped beside him and several uniformed police officers approached. The officers informed him that a bearded man had allegedly committed a murder and instructed him to accompany them to a police station. After being photographed and fingerprinted, he was escorted into another room where shaving equipment had already been prepared. Despite his

objections, several officers restrained him and forcibly shaved his beard. Such incidents demonstrate the coercive nature of state policies toward visible religious expression and the willingness of law enforcement authorities to use intimidation and force in pursuit of ideological objectives.

State control extends far beyond personal appearance. In an effort to regulate and restrict religious activity, the government has imposed extensive registration requirements upon religious institutions and has overseen the closure of large numbers of mosques throughout the country. In January 2011 alone, more than fifty mosques were reportedly closed in Dushanbe. The number of closures in other regions remains difficult to verify, but available evidence suggests that hundreds of additional mosques were affected. The authorities generally justified these closures by citing registration irregularities, building code violations, or administrative deficiencies. Critics, however, argued that the closures formed part of a broader campaign designed to limit independent religious activity and bring Islamic institutions under direct state supervision.
The state's intrusion into religious life has also extended into family affairs. Legislation and administrative measures have restricted the ability of children to participate in religious activities and attend mosques. Such policies have generated substantial criticism from human rights advocates, who argue that they interfere with parental rights and undermine the ability of families to transmit religious traditions to younger generations. Women who wear traditional Islamic attire have similarly faced obstacles in education, employment, and public life. The authorities have repeatedly attempted to discourage the wearing of hijabs through administrative pressure, public campaigns, and direct intervention by law enforcement agencies.

The government also exercises extensive control over religious literature, publications, and educational materials. Religious books, sermons, and other materials are subject to censorship and review by state authorities. Independent religious education has become

increasingly difficult, while opportunities to study religion outside official channels remain highly restricted. Individuals suspected of possessing unauthorized religious materials frequently attract the attention of security services and may become subject to investigation or detention. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly expressed concern regarding the deteriorating state of religious freedom in Tajikistan. According to the organization, the government continues to enforce highly restrictive legislation governing religious activity while simultaneously introducing additional measures that further limit religious expression and education. Human Rights Watch has also documented broader restrictions on civil liberties, including controls on media activity and politically motivated prosecutions. One notable example involved BBC correspondent Urunboy Usmonov, who in 2011 was convicted on charges related to alleged involvement with a prohibited religious organization in a case widely viewed as politically motivated.

The closure of mosques accelerated dramatically during the following decade. During the first six months of 2015 alone, authorities reportedly closed 1,032 mosques throughout Tajikistan. In August 2016, the last functioning madrasa in the country was shut down, effectively eliminating one of the final remaining institutions providing independent Islamic education. The campaign continued in 2017, when approximately 1,938 mosques were reportedly closed under a variety of administrative pretexts, most commonly allegations concerning documentation and registration deficiencies.

At the same time, criminal prosecutions increasingly targeted individuals associated with nonofficial interpretations of Islam. In September 2018, the Ismoili Somoni District Court in Dushanbe sentenced blogger Dzhunaidullo Khudoyerov to five years of imprisonment after accusing him of supporting the Salafi movement. Such prosecutions contributed to an

atmosphere of fear among devout Muslims and reinforced concerns that peaceful religious activity could result in criminal liability.

International observers have documented the far-reaching nature of these restrictions. Forum 18 reported that mosques and practicing Muslims face particularly severe limitations imposed through the state-controlled Council of Ulems and other government institutions. Restrictions introduced in 2017 affected the observance of Islamic festivals and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Measures targeting beards and hijabs continued to be aggressively enforced, reportedly contributing in some cases to family breakdowns and divorce. Authorities established checkpoints and roadblocks to monitor compliance, while educational institutions and universities were instructed to enforce appearance-related restrictions.

Legislative amendments adopted in January 2018 further expanded governmental control over Islamic institutions. Under revised provisions of the Religion Law, mosque communities were required to obtain approval from the State Committee on Religious Affairs before utilizing buildings for worship, while local authorities required additional state authorization before allocating land for the construction of mosques. The appointment of imams, imam-hatyps, and senior religious leaders became subject to state approval. Human rights defenders observed that mosques increasingly ceased functioning as independent religious institutions and instead became extensions of the state apparatus. According to testimony provided to Forum 18, religious leaders were widely believed to share information concerning mosque attendees with security services and other government agencies.

Concerns regarding corruption further compounded these issues. Human rights defenders reported that mosques were increasingly required to transfer portions of their income to state-controlled religious institutions. Tajikistan's persistent corruption problems have raised additional concerns regarding the politicization of religious administration and the financial exploitation of

religious communities. Efforts by journalists and researchers to obtain explanations from officials regarding these practices were frequently unsuccessful. Representatives of both the State Committee on Religious Affairs and the Council of Ulems repeatedly declined to discuss the restrictions imposed upon religious communities or answer questions concerning financial arrangements involving mosques.

Viewed collectively, these developments reveal a systematic effort by the Tajik authorities to bring religious life under comprehensive state control. Through the closure of mosques, restrictions on religious education, regulation of personal appearance, censorship of religious literature, interference in family life, and extensive surveillance of religious communities, the government has significantly narrowed the space available for independent religious practice. The cumulative effect of these policies has been the creation of an environment in which devout Muslims frequently experience intimidation, social marginalization, official scrutiny, arbitrary detention, and other forms of coercive pressure solely because of the manner in which they choose to practice and express their faith.

The campaign directed against visible manifestations of Islamic faith in Tajikistan has continued to intensify in recent years and increasingly reflects a broader state policy aimed at bringing all forms of religious life under strict governmental control. Authorities have devoted substantial attention not only to combating genuine security threats but also to regulating personal religious expression, religious education, religious institutions, and individual religious identity. As a result, many devout Muslims have become subject to surveillance, harassment, detention, criminal prosecution, and other forms of state pressure solely because of the manner in which they practice their faith.

Particularly alarming are documented cases involving the treatment of women who wear the hijab. In December 2019, approximately twenty women were detained in Dushanbe because

they were wearing Islamic headscarves. One of those detained, Nilufar Rajabova, later provided a detailed account of her treatment while in police custody. According to her testimony, a senior police official approached her, verbally abused her, repeatedly pushed her, and struck her with sufficient force to cause her to fall to the ground. Rajabova stated that she experienced severe pain and dizziness and was unable to stand without assistance. She further alleged that police officers threatened her mother when she arrived at the station and subjected both women to degrading treatment. Despite numerous formal complaints submitted to prosecutorial authorities, no officials were held accountable. The absence of meaningful investigations or disciplinary measures illustrates broader concerns regarding impunity for abuses committed by law enforcement personnel against individuals targeted because of their religious appearance. Independent human rights defenders and local observers reported that police operations targeting women wearing hijabs continued in Dushanbe, Vahdat, and other locations. These campaigns reportedly involved officers stopping women in public places, questioning them regarding their religious beliefs, and pressuring them to abandon traditional Islamic attire. Similar measures have been directed against men who wear beards associated with religious observance. Police checkpoints and roadblocks have periodically been established to identify individuals whose appearance is deemed inconsistent with officially approved standards. Such practices demonstrate the extent to which visible manifestations of religious identity have become objects of state regulation and control.

Restrictions imposed upon religious communities extend well beyond personal appearance. Forum 18 and other international monitoring organizations have documented extensive state interference in the activities of mosques and religious institutions. The state-controlled Council of Ulems and other government agencies exercise substantial influence over virtually every aspect of Islamic practice. Regulations govern the conduct of religious

ceremonies, observance of Islamic holidays, participation in the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, and the operation of mosques. In some cases, enforcement of restrictions on beards and hijabs has reportedly contributed to the breakdown of families and forced divorces. Religious believers frequently encounter pressure not only from security services but also from educational institutions, local authorities, and community organizations acting in cooperation with the state. The authorities have also aggressively pursued individuals suspected of adhering to religious beliefs or movements that fall outside officially approved interpretations of Islam. On December 29, 2019, Khayriddin Dostakov was arrested upon his arrival at Dushanbe Airport after returning from Russia. Although officials accused him of spreading extremist ideas, available information suggests that security services were primarily interested in his religious beliefs and possible association with Shia Islam. Human rights advocates reported that he was subjected to severe torture while held in detention, including repeated electric shocks. According to testimony provided by observers familiar with his case, Dostakov lost consciousness several times during interrogation and emerged from detention visibly injured. Authorities also conducted searches of his family's residence and confiscated religious literature. These events illustrate how allegations of religious extremism are frequently employed to justify harsh measures against individuals whose religious activities are entirely peaceful.

Another highly significant case involved Sadriddin Mulloyev, who returned to Tajikistan under an official amnesty program in 2019. Despite having relied upon government assurances, he was subsequently prosecuted and sentenced to twelve years of imprisonment because of his earlier association with the Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat. Proceedings reportedly took place behind closed doors, while family members strongly denied the allegations. Such cases contribute to widespread fears that individuals associated with independent religious

movements may face severe punishment regardless of whether they have engaged in any unlawful conduct.

The broader human rights record of Tajikistan demonstrates a consistent pattern of restrictions on freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. International organizations have documented numerous violations, including prohibitions on religious activities conducted without state authorization, restrictions on visible expressions of faith, severe limitations on the operation of mosques, restrictions on religious education, monitoring of religious communities, criminal prosecutions based on allegations of extremism, censorship of religious literature, and imprisonment of individuals whose beliefs differ from state-approved religious interpretations. Members of Islamic movements, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestant communities, and other religious groups have all experienced varying degrees of pressure and repression. Particularly troubling are reports documenting torture and ill-treatment of detainees accused of religious offenses, accompanied by a near complete absence of accountability for those responsible.

Government efforts to criminalize independent religious activity have continued in recent years. Salafism has remained officially banned since 2011, and authorities regularly arrest individuals accused of affiliation with Salafi groups. In 2021, a closed trial involving eighteen alleged members of the Salafi movement resulted in lengthy prison sentences despite claims by defendants and family members that the accusations were fabricated and confessions obtained through torture. During the same period, lawmakers proposed amendments increasing penalties for unauthorized religious education, including online instruction, thereby expanding the state's ability to regulate the transmission of religious knowledge. These measures further narrowed the already limited space available for independent religious activity.

State hostility toward independent Islamic institutions has been equally evident in the systematic dismantling of religious educational structures. All madrassas operating within Tajikistan were closed under the stated justification that authorities were developing a standardized religious curriculum. However, the promised reopening never occurred. Today, religious education remains heavily restricted, while officially approved imams are appointed and supervised by the Committee on Religious Affairs. Their salaries are paid by the state, and sermons are often prepared or approved in advance by government authorities. Numerous mosques have been closed, converted to other uses, or demolished, while smaller prayer facilities have disappeared from many communities. The cumulative effect has been the transformation of religious institutions into extensions of the state apparatus rather than independent centers of religious life.

The government's determination to regulate Islamic practice reached a new stage in 2024. On June 19, 2024, the upper chamber of parliament approved legislation prohibiting so-called foreign garments and restricting children's participation in celebrations associated with the major Islamic holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The legislation specifically targeted the hijab and other forms of Islamic attire that officials characterized as foreign influences associated with religious extremism. The law formalized longstanding administrative practices aimed at discouraging Islamic dress and transformed these restrictions into binding legal requirements. Additional provisions limited traditional celebrations, regulated gatherings associated with returning pilgrims, and imposed extensive controls upon family and community customs. International observers viewed the legislation as another significant step toward institutionalizing state interference in religious life and further narrowing the scope of religious freedom within the country.

Viewed in its entirety, the evidence demonstrates a sustained pattern of governmental efforts to control, restrict, and suppress independent Islamic practice. Through surveillance, detention, criminal prosecution, censorship, mosque closures, restrictions on religious education, bans on Islamic attire, interference in family life, and the use of torture and coercive interrogations, the authorities have created an environment in which devout Muslims frequently face serious risks because of their religious beliefs and practices. In contemporary Tajikistan, where Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school enjoys official recognition yet remains subject to extensive state supervision, devout Muslims whose beliefs, appearance, or activities fall outside government-approved boundaries often encounter harassment, physical abuse, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and other severe consequences. For many believers, the simple act of practicing their faith openly has become a source of substantial personal risk.

In conclusion, the available evidence indicates that the Tajik government has established an extensive and highly intrusive system of regulation over religious life that extends well beyond legitimate concerns relating to public security and counterterrorism. Through the closure of mosques and religious educational institutions, stringent regulation of religious instruction, censorship of religious literature, restrictions on Islamic attire and other visible manifestations of faith, pervasive surveillance, arbitrary detention, criminal prosecutions, and documented instances of torture and physical abuse, the authorities have significantly constrained the ability of devout Muslims to practice and express their religious beliefs independently of state oversight. Although these measures are routinely justified by official references to combating extremism, preserving secularism, and maintaining social stability, their implementation has frequently affected peaceful believers, religious activists, independent Islamic scholars, and ordinary citizens whose activities bear no apparent connection to violence or threats to national security.

The cumulative effect of these policies has been the emergence of an increasingly restrictive environment in which religious observance is subject to close scrutiny and deviations from state-approved interpretations of Islam are frequently viewed with suspicion. The continuing expansion of governmental authority over religious institutions, combined with limited judicial independence, weak procedural safeguards, and the extensive powers exercised by security services, has fostered a climate of fear and uncertainty among many practicing Muslims. Recent legislative developments, including additional restrictions on religious attire, religious education, and participation in Islamic traditions and ceremonies, suggest that state intervention in religious affairs is likely to deepen further. From a historical, political science, and human rights perspective, contemporary Tajikistan illustrates the manner in which authoritarian systems may invoke concerns regarding extremism and security to legitimize far-reaching control over religious communities, resulting in substantial limitations on freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and other fundamental rights protected under international law.

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