

TAJIKISTAN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right, individually or jointly with others, to adhere to any religion or to no religion, and to participate in religious customs and ceremonies. The constitution says religious organizations shall be separate from the state and “shall not interfere in state affairs.” An amendment to the constitution, passed in May, bans political parties based on religion. The law restricts Islamic prayer to specific locations, regulates the registration and location of mosques, and prohibits persons under 18 from participating in public religious activities. The government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) controls all aspects of religious life, including approving registration of religious associations, construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature. The government continued to take measures to prevent individuals from joining or participating in what it considered to be “extremist” organizations, arresting or detaining over 100 persons, primarily for membership in banned religious groups, including Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Ansarrullah, Jindullah, ISIS, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Officials continued to prevent minority religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, from registering their organizations. Domestic and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) stated both registered and unregistered religious organizations continued to be subject to police raids, surveillance, and forced closures. Government bodies continued to harass Jehovah’s Witnesses. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce a religious edict prohibiting women from praying at mosques. The government continued to install surveillance cameras and metal detectors in mosques for the stated purpose of monitoring potential “religious extremist” activity. Human rights activists asserted authorities sought to “establish total control of Muslim activity” in the country. The government reported it had closed over 1,000 “illegal” prayer rooms and mosques in different parts of the country over the past few years or converted them into cultural and entertainment centers. The government issued warnings (informal rather than legal action) to over 100 mullahs for providing “illegal” religious education to young people. The CRA told the media it planned to organize refresher courses for imam-khatibs (religious leaders who preach sermons and conduct weekly Friday prayers) to educate them on the “behavior of potential extremists.” There were numerous reports of authorities harassing women wearing hijabs and men with beards; authorities continued the practice of periodically raiding and shutting down shops selling such “nontraditional” Tajik clothing. Government officials issued statements discouraging women from wearing so-

called “nontraditional” clothing. The Ministry of Education announced the introduction of a new course on the history of religion in public schools.

Individuals outside of the government remained reluctant to discuss societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief. Ethnic Tajiks who converted from Islam reported they at times faced disapproval from family members or pressure to return to their traditional faith. Leaders of some minority religious communities stated the local population did not hinder their worship services. Other minority religious representatives reported their members experienced social disapproval, especially from friends, neighbors, and relatives of members who had converted from Islam.

The U.S. ambassador, embassy staff, and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government officials, including CRA members, to encourage them to adhere to international commitments to respect freedom of religion and belief. Embassy officers continued to raise concerns about government restrictions on religious practices, including restrictions on women and minors participating in religious services, interference with peaceful religious activities, rejection of attempts of minority religions to register their organizations, restrictions on religious education of youth, harassment of those wearing religious attire, and limitations on the publication or importation of religious literature. The embassy also raised the lack of due process in the government’s prosecution of individuals under its definition of “religious extremism.” Embassy officers also met regularly with religious leaders and civil society groups to address the same issues and discuss their concern over government restrictions on the ability of minority religious groups to practice their religious beliefs freely. On February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State designated Tajikistan as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On October 31, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.3 million (July 2016 estimate). According to local academics, the population is more than 90 percent Muslim and the majority adheres to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Approximately 4 percent of Muslims are Ismaili Shia, the majority of who reside

in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region located in the eastern part of the country.

Other religious minorities include Christians and small numbers of Bahais, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jews. The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox; there are also Baptists, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, and Korean Protestants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country a secular state and religious associations shall be separate from the state and "shall not interfere in state affairs." According to the constitution, everyone has the right individually or jointly to adhere to any religion or to adhere to no religion, and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies.

The law prohibits provoking religious-based hatred, enmity, or conflict, as well as humiliating and harming the religious sentiments of other citizens.

The law defines extremism as the activities of individuals and organizations aimed at destabilization, subverting the constitutional order, or seizing power. This definition includes inciting religious and other forms of hatred.

The law recognizes the "special status" of Sunni Islam's Hanafi school of jurisprudence with respect to the country's culture and spiritual life.

The law defines any group of people who join together for religious purposes as a religious association. These associations are formed for the aim of "conducting joint religious worship" and are subdivided into religious organizations and religious communities. In order to operate legally, religious associations and organizations are required to register with the government, a process overseen by the CRA.

In order to register a religious organization, a group of at least 10 persons over the age of 18 must first obtain a certificate from the local authorities confirming that adherents of their religious faith have lived in the local area for at least five years. The group must then submit to the CRA proof of the citizenship of its founders,

along with the home address and date of birth of each. The group must also provide an account of its beliefs and religious practices and describe its attitudes related to education, family, and marriage, and provide documentation on the health of its adherents. As part of its submission, a religious group must list its “national religious centers, central cathedral mosques (facilities built for Friday prayers), central *jamoatkhona* (prayer places), religious educational institutions, churches, synagogues, and other forms not contradicting the law.” The group must specify in its charter the activities it plans to undertake, and, once registered as a religious organization, must report annually on its activities or face deregistration.

Religious communities include cathedral mosques and mosques where prayers are recited five times per day. These communities are required to register both locally and nationally, and must be registered “without the formation of a legal personality.” Religious communities must adhere to the “essence and limits of activity” set out in their charters.

The law provides penalties for religious associations which engage in activities contrary to the purposes and objectives set out in their charter, and assigns responsibility to the CRA for handing down fines for such offenses. The law imposes fines for violating its provisions on organizing and conducting religious activities; providing religious education without permission; performing prayers, religious rites, and ceremonies in undesignated places; and performing activities beyond the purposes and objectives defined by the charter of the religious association. Individuals are subject to fines of 280 to 400 somoni (\$36-\$51) for these offenses, heads of religious associations are fined 800 to 1,200 somoni (\$103-\$154), and registered religious associations, as legal entities themselves, are subject to fines of 4,000 to 8,000 somoni (\$513-\$1,026). For offenses committed repeatedly within a year after the original offense, fines are increased to 480 to 800 somoni (\$62-\$103) for individuals, 1,600 to 2,000 somoni (\$205-\$256) for heads of religious associations, and 12,000 to 16,000 somoni (\$1,538-\$2,051) for the registered religious associations.

If a religious association conducts activities without obtaining registration or reregistration, local authorities may force a place of worship to close, and fine each member from 280-400 somoni (\$36-\$51) for first time individual offenders, 800-1,200 somoni (\$103-\$154) for religious association leaders, and 4,000-8,000 somoni (\$513-\$1,026) for the unregistered religious association as an entity. In case of repetition of the same offense within one year, the authorities may levy fines of 480-800 somoni (\$62-\$103) for repeat individual offenders, 1,600-2,000

somoni (\$205-\$256) for religious association leaders, and 12,000-16,000 somoni (\$1,538-\$2,051) for the religious associations themselves.

The CRA is the government body primarily responsible for overseeing and implementing all provisions of the law pertaining to religion. The Center for Islamic Studies, under the president's executive office, helps formulate the government's policy toward religion.

The law restricts Islamic prayer to four locations: mosques, cemeteries, homes, and shrines. The law regulates registration, size, and location of mosques, limiting the number of mosques which may be registered within a given population area. "Friday" mosques, which conduct larger Friday prayers as well as prayers five times per day, are allowed in districts with populations of 10,000 to 20,000 persons; "five-time" mosques, which conduct only daily prayers five times per day, are allowed in areas with populations of 100 to 10,000. In Dushanbe, Friday mosques are allowed in areas with 30,000 to 50,000 persons, and five-time mosques are allowed in areas with populations of 1,000 to 5,000. The law allows one "central Friday mosque" per district or city, and makes other mosques subordinate to it.

Mosques function on the basis of their self-designed charters in buildings constructed by government approved religious organizations or by individual citizens, or with the assistance of the general population. The law states the selection of imam-khatibs and imams shall take place in coordination with "the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs" (i.e., the CRA must approve the imam-khatibs and imams elected by the founders of each mosque). The CRA regulates and formulates the content of Friday sermons.

The law regulates private celebrations, including weddings, funeral services, and celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The law limits the number of guests and controls ceremonial gift presentations and other rituals. The law states mass worship, religious traditions, and ceremonies shall be carried out according to the procedures for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and peaceful processions prescribed elsewhere in the law.

The law prohibits children under 18 years of age from participating in "public religious activities," including attending worship services at public places of worship. Children are allowed to attend religious funerals and to practice religion at home, under parental guidance. The law allows children to participate in

religious activities as part of specific educational programs at authorized religious institutions.

The law allows registered religious organizations to produce, export, import, and distribute an unspecified amount of religious literature with the advance consent of the appropriate state authorities. Only registered religious organizations are entitled to establish enterprises to produce literature and material with religious content. Such literature and material must indicate the full name of the religious organization producing it. The law allows the government authorities to levy fines for the production, export, import, sale, or distribution of religious literature without permission from the CRA. According to the law, violators are subject to fines of up to 2,800 somoni (\$359) for individuals, 6,000 somoni (\$769) for government officials (who distribute or produce literature without permission), and 12,000 somoni (\$1,538) for legal entities, a category including organizations of any kind as well as registered religious associations.

The law requires all institutions or groups wishing to provide religious instruction to obtain permission from the CRA. Central district mosques may operate madrassahs, which are open only to high school graduates. Other mosques, if registered with the government, may provide part-time religious instruction for younger students.

With written parental consent, the law allows minors between the ages of seven and 18 to obtain religious instruction provided by a registered religious organization outside of mandatory school hours. According to the law, this kind of extracurricular religious education may not duplicate religious instruction already part of the school curriculum. The CRA is responsible for monitoring mosques throughout the country to ensure implementation of these provisions.

Parents may teach religion to their children at home, provided the child expresses a desire to learn. The law forbids religious instruction at home to individuals outside the immediate family. The law maintains restrictions on sending citizens abroad for religious education, and for establishing ties with religious organizations abroad without CRA consent. To be eligible to study religion abroad, students must complete a higher education degree domestically and be enrolled at a university accredited in the country in which it operates. The law provides for fines of 2,000 to 4,000 somoni (\$256 to \$513) for violating these restrictions.

In a May 22 constitutional referendum, voters approved a package of 40 proposed amendments, including one banning the creation of political parties based on

religion. As a result of the referendum, the constitution now prohibits political parties of “a religious nature.”

The constitution prohibits “propaganda and agitation” encouraging religious enmity.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government continued to take measures to prevent individuals from joining or participating in what it considered to be “extremist” organizations. The government arrested or detained over 100 persons as “extremists,” primarily individuals it suspected of supporting Salafi ideas. NGOs stated authorities continued to refuse to register religious groups on technical or administrative grounds and without registration, groups risked criminal or civil penalties for operating. The Jehovah’s Witnesses and the country’s sole Jewish synagogue remained unregistered. Hanafi Sunni mosques continued to enforce the fatwa prohibiting women from praying at mosques. Human rights activists asserted that authorities sought to “establish total control of Muslim activity” in the country. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) continued to conduct video surveillance of mosques in Dushanbe, stating its focus was on individuals who attended multiple mosques as most likely to spread “radical ideology.” Authorities continued to shut down “illegal” prayer rooms and mosques around the country. Officials stated 29 religious associations had voluntarily terminated their activities during the year after notification their mosques were surplus to the number officially allocated to their locations. During a meeting with local imam-khatibs, the chief of the Department of Internal Affairs in Sughd Region stated his department had warned 138 mullahs for providing “illegal” religious education to young people. The CRA told the media it planned to organize refresher courses for imam-khatibs to educate them on the “behavior of potential extremists.” NGOs reported the authorities continued to harass women wearing hijabs, as well as men with beards, and continued to conduct raids to shut down shops selling such “nontraditional” Tajik clothing. Government officials issued statements discouraging women from wearing nontraditional clothing. The Ministry of Education announced the introduction of a new course on the history of religion in public schools.

The government continued to arrest and detain individuals whom it suspected of membership in or support for any of the groups on its list of groups banned as extremist. Those groups included Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Qaida, the Muslim

Brotherhood, the Taliban, Jamaat Tabligh, Islamic Group (Islamic Community of Pakistan), Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan, Islamic Party of Turkestan (former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – IMU), Lashkar-e-Tayba, Tojikistoni Ozod, Sozmoni Tablighot, Salafiya, Jamaat Ansarullah, Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), and Group 24.

On July 20, the Acting Chief of the Sughd Regional Department of Religious Affairs, Suhrob Rustamzoda, told media the authorities in the first half of the year had detained nine imam-khatibs and sentenced them to various terms of imprisonment in Sughd Region for membership in the banned Salafi movement. As of the end of the year, no updated figures were available.

In two separate cases in February, the Khujand City Court sentenced 14 residents of Sughd Region to prison terms for disseminating Salafi ideas. In the first case, authorities charged the 11 defendants with organizing extremist activity and participating in a banned extremist movement, and the court handed down sentences ranging from three years and two months to five years and six months. In the second case, the three defendants pled guilty to spreading Salafi ideas after joining a Salafi group in 2004. The court sentenced each of them to three years in prison.

In March local authorities in the Jaloliddin Balkhi District told the media they had detained 25 alleged Salafists from different villages and settlements of the district. Some of the individuals were reportedly detained following complaints by imams from local mosques.

In April and again in July Dushanbe's Ismoil Somoni District Court convicted four individuals for membership in the Salafi movement. According to the court's website, in the first case the court sentenced Romish Boboev to 16 years imprisonment, Otabek Azimov to 14 years imprisonment, and Abdurahmon Ismoilov and Khurshed Suvanov to three years imprisonment each. In the second case, the court sentenced Muhammadi Rahmatulloh to eight years imprisonment for "organizing an extremist community."

In August during a working meeting at the Khujand mayor's office, the Chief of the Interior Ministry's office in Khujand, Colonel Emin Jalilov, announced the authorities had detained 30 residents of Khujand over the first seven months of the year for membership in various extremist and terrorist parties and movements. According to Jalilov, the authorities had previously "registered" (placed on a list of alleged extremists maintained by the government) 245 members of the Hizb ut-

Tahrir group and 226 members of the Salafi group in Khujand. He said the authorities had jailed the majority of them, although he did not specify when this had occurred. As of the end of the year, no updated figures were available.

In May the authorities arrested five imam-khatibs of mosques in the northern Konibodom District, all reputedly members of the Muslim Brotherhood, on suspicion of spreading extremist propaganda, and for allegedly calling upon young people to go fight in Syria.

On June 7, in a closed trial, the Bobojon Ghafurov District Court convicted seven mosque imams from the northern Sughd region on charges of extremism based on their membership in the Muslim Brotherhood and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from three years to three years and four months. All the imams reportedly were graduates of the Islamic University of Medina, Saudi Arabia, where, investigators said, the men were recruited into the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s.

In September the media reported police had arrested five imams from the Sughd region for promoting extremist ideas and recruiting young people to join Islamist militant groups abroad. On December 19, the media reported a total of approximately 20 imam-khatibs from the Sughd region had been given prison sentences of varying lengths for involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood in closed trials held during the year.

On July 4, the national TV channel Tojikiston broadcast a report sourced to the Ministry of Internal Affairs on Orifjon Ergashev, the former Imam-khatib of the Taqvo mosque in Khujand, who allegedly had voluntarily surrendered to police and confessed his membership in the Muslim Brotherhood. According to the report, Ergashev reportedly said he had joined the Muslim Brotherhood while studying abroad from 1993 to 2001 and regularly received payments from the group. During almost 15 years as a teacher at the Khujand madrassah, he had allegedly engaged in promoting Muslim Brotherhood ideas among parishioners.

On August 8, the Dushanbe Court convicted 18 residents of Roghun District on charges of religious extremism, without specifying the nature of the religious acts they had undertaken, but also for allegedly issuing public calls for the forcible overthrow of the country's constitutional order. The 18 convicted included two local imams. The group was sentenced to prison terms ranging from three years and six months to 10 years.

On January 28, the Chief of the Department of Internal Affairs in Sughd Region, Sharif Nazarzoda, told the media police in 2015 had arrested approximately 110 members of different extremist and terrorist groups in the region, including 36 members of Salafi groups, 34 members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, 20 members of Ansarullah, seven members of Jindullah, five members of the IRPT, four members of ISIS, and two of Hizb ut-Tahrir.

On February 22, media reported police had detained two merchants from Korvon Bazaar because they wore beards. In a February 23 statement, the Ministry of Internal Affairs denied the authorities had detained the two merchants because of their beards and stated the individuals had been detained on suspicion of involvement in terrorist and extremist movements intending to destabilize the political situation in the country.

On May 26, the Isfara City Court sentenced Oqil Sharifov to one year in prison after he filmed police in a local market detaining two women wearing hijabs. Sharifov was convicted on charges of inciting ethnic, racial, regional, or religious enmity.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported a case in which police raided a peaceful gathering and temporarily detained all the participants, including women and children. Some of the detainees were beaten and one was reportedly tasered and knocked unconscious.

The CRA reportedly continued to send out guidance to imam-khatibs on the content of Friday sermons. In some cases, there were reports of the CRA sending out the text of sermons for imam-khatibs to deliver.

On several occasions, NGOs reported authorities refused to register religious groups on technical or administrative grounds. Without registration, the NGOs said, the groups continued to risk criminal or civil penalties for operating. Domestic and international NGOs stated both registered and unregistered religious organizations continued to be subject to police raids, surveillance, and forced closures.

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses reported ongoing difficulties with the government and stated the government remained unwilling to register the group. The group said it continued to face harassment as a result of its lack of registration.

The country's sole synagogue remained unregistered, reportedly because the emigration of many Jews from the country meant the Jewish community continued to have too few members to meet the registration requirements.

According to statements made to the press by the CRA's top officials, there were 4,089 religious associations registered in the country, 72 of which were non-Muslim religious associations, and one of which was a non-Muslim religious community. The CRA did not report whether the number of registered associations included any newly approved during the year, nor did the CRA provide any information on whether there had been any applications for registration during the year. In terms of Muslim religious associations, the CRA stated there was one Islamic Center, 324 Friday mosques (where sermons were offered on Fridays), 47 central Friday mosques (which exercised jurisdiction over other Friday mosques), 3,558 five-time mosques (where sermons were offered during the day, but not on Fridays), and two Ismaili centers. At a January 12 press conference, CRA First Deputy Chairman Jumakhon Ghiyosov stated the CRA maintained "close cooperation" with all "legitimate" religious associations.

Hanafi Sunni mosques maintained enforcement of the 2004 fatwa issued by the Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying at mosques. Although the government had publicly stated the fatwa was a religious ruling rather than a law, a government official privately stated there was little evidence the public understood the distinction. NGOs stated the public perception was the Ulema Council operated under the control of the government. Women of other traditions, such as Ismaili Shia, were not subject to the Ulema Council's prohibition.

Although neither the constitution nor the law made the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam the official religion of the country, observers said the government treated it as the "first among equals" because the majority of the population adhered to it. The CRA stated imam-khatibs should conduct preventative conversations with people who prayed "out of frames set by the Hanafi" Sunni school of thought.

The MIA continued to conduct video surveillance of mosques in Dushanbe, and said it hoped to expand the program to other cities.

On October 4, then-Mayor of Dushanbe Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloev ordered all official Friday and five-time mosques in the city to install surveillance cameras and metal detectors at their entrances. He said the camera feeds would be sent to the central mosque Hoji Yaqub, where the videos would be monitored. Ubaydulloev stated this step would make the city more secure. All costs of these security

measures should be covered by the mosques themselves, according to Ubaydullov. The mayor's office stated cameras and metal detectors would also be installed in educational and medical facilities, restaurants, and public service and trading centers. The CRA, however, stated these measures would apply only to Dushanbe's mosques and the mosques would be able to use donations to cover the costs of the cameras. The difference between the positions of the mayor and CRA remained unresolved as of year's end.

On February 8, during a meeting with imam-khatibs and imams of local mosques in Khujand as well as representatives of law enforcement and other agencies, the Mayor of Khujand, Rajabboy Ahmadzoda, ordered the establishment of a working group to review the performance of all mosques in the city and to identify the exact number of mosques in Khujand. According to the mayor, if there were two or three mosques in one neighborhood and the distance between the mosques was negligible, this would be inconsistent with the law specifying the number and kinds of mosques allowed to exist in a given area based on its population, and at least one of the mosques ought to be converted into a public facility. "Excessive" mosques, he said, ought to be turned into sewing shops, teahouses, or kindergartens. The working group consisted of the Department of Religion and law enforcement employees.

According to the international NGO Forum 18, the Interior Minister stated in a January 25 press conference the authorities had closed 900 out of an estimated 1,500 prayer rooms and mosques in Dushanbe. At a July press conference, CRA Chairman Sulaymon Davlatzoda told the media the government had not stopped the activities of any "official mosque" for the last six years. He said those mosques whose activities were suspended were previously public facilities which later illegally had been turned into mosques. The mosques were shut, he said, because they lacked government approval for their activities. In the past two years, Davlatzoda said, the government had converted 1,032 mosques in different parts of the country into cultural and entertainment centers, or so-called "public places." Davlatzoda further stated 29 "religious associations" (the classification officially applied to mosques) had "voluntarily" terminated their activities in the first six months of the year after receiving letters from city governments saying their mosques were surplus to the number of mosques officially allocated to their locations.

In March the media reported the CRA suspended the activities of 133 "illegal" mosques in Rudaki District. According to CRA statements, the mosques had been constructed without proper documentation. The chairman of the district issued a

decree converting the mosques to schools, kindergartens, medical units, sport halls, cultural centers, and computer and sewing shops.

In April authorities of Kulob City told the media the local government had given seven buildings, which had been illegally used as mosques, to homeless families. The authorities also said they had determined 54 mosques in Kulob were operating illegally due to a lack of appropriate documentation. City authorities said some of the mosques had already been turned into recreation facilities.

On May 14, during a meeting with local imam-khatibs, Sharif Nazarzoda, Chief of the Department of Internal Affairs in the Sughd region, stated his department had warned 138 mullahs for providing illegal religious education to young people in the first four months of the year. The mullahs were fined a total of 28,000 somoni (\$3,590). As of the end of the year, there was no information on whether the authorities in Sughd had warned or fined additional mullahs.

In January the CRA told the media it planned to organize refresher courses for imam-khatibs. Representatives of official religious organizations, the Islamic Center, and lawyers would conduct courses for imam-khatibs to educate them about the behavior of potential extremists and terrorists during prayers. CRA officials stated since 2013, 2,543 imam-khatibs from all parts of the country had taken refresher courses.

CRA First Deputy Chairman Ghiyosov told the media in January there were 1966 students studying to become clergy at the Imam Azam Islamic Institute in Dushanbe. He said there were another 89 students studying at the Islamic gymnasium/lyceum. He provided no indication whether these figures represented a change from prior years.

The government ban on financial donations by individuals to mosques remained in effect. Clergy continued to be salaried government employees. The CRA continued to pay Muslim clerics a monthly salary of 800-1,000 somoni (\$103-\$128), depending upon their position. The CRA also continued to require clerics to wear a specific robe while performing official duties and continued its 25 percent subsidy of the robe's cost.

In Dushanbe Muslim clergy continued to use loudspeakers for the call to prayer, despite a public disturbance regulation prohibiting the use of external loudspeakers for *azan* (the Islamic call to prayer) in the city's mosques if residents in the vicinity of a mosque complained to city authorities.

In January the government released a new order on performing the Hajj. According to the order, citizens who wanted to perform the Hajj had to be 40 years old. After returning from the Hajj, a pilgrim would have to wait five years before performing the Hajj again. According to the CRA, the regulation was intended to give older Tajiks the opportunity to make the Hajj. The government stated it had urged the government of Saudi Arabia to increase the number of Tajik pilgrims it allowed but thus far there had been no change.

The Ulema Council continued to interpret sharia as limiting beard lengths for men to the size of a fist and requiring women's clothing to cover the entire body except for hands, face, and feet. Although a media report released in January stated the government had forcibly shaved the beards of an estimated 15,000 men in 2015, observers stated there were only a few reports of forced shavings during the year. One civil society representative reported he was told to cut his beard in order to obtain a driver's license, but said he eventually was allowed to take his driver's license picture without cutting his beard.

With so many men shaving to avoid government scrutiny, observers said, the government had shifted its focus away from beards toward hijabs. Women wearing hijabs stated they were often harassed by law enforcement, despite the absence of any law banning hijabs. On June 23, three women requested assistance from an international organization because of government harassment they said they had received for wearing hijabs. One woman reportedly was approached at home and at work by plainclothes police officers who told her she needed to remove her hijab if she wished to continue operating her stand at a local market in Sughd Region. Police told her daughter the same and reportedly said the daughter would face prosecution if she did not comply. A second woman said authorities had delivered the same threat to her at her place of work in a different bazaar. A third woman, a housewife, said she had faced harassment from local authorities for wearing the hijab as she went about her daily activities. Six police officers reportedly approached her in a market and questioned her about her hijab. She said the officers had threatened her with detention, although they took no action against her. One of the women filed an official complaint with the CRA and the MIA. According to the international organization, the three women stated the authorities had increased their harassment of women wearing hijabs since May. They said they knew of instances where police had raided homes and public spaces and ordered women to remove hijabs. They also reported instances of children being denied entry to kindergarten because their mothers wore hijabs.

On May 24, during a meeting with representatives of several government bodies including the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health, the Interior Ministry, the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), as well as heads of Dushanbe's bazaars and trade centers and deputy mayors of Tursunzoda and Rudaki District, the Head of the Committee for Women and Family Affairs, Idigul Qosimzoda, called on local women to wear Tajik national dress and to refrain from wearing clothing "alien" to Tajik culture. According to media reports, she urged the meeting's participants to encourage their employees to wear national clothing, and to reject "alien" clothing.

During the course of a televised conference at the beginning of June, Sharif Nazarzoda, head of the Sughd Department of the MIA, stated "some women and girls" were associated with extremist/terrorist organizations and drew a link between these women and those who followed "alien culture and traditions." According to human rights NGOs and international media, references to "alien culture and traditions" had become a government euphemism for the wearing of hijabs. Nazarzoda said the MIA would detain women in hijabs and would investigate whether their husbands were Salafists, because the Sughd MIA had determined all Salafist wives wore hijabs.

In August chief of the Interior Ministry's Khujand office Jalilov stated police officers had conducted approximately 40 raids since the beginning of the year in bazaars and shopping points and had registered 643 women (i.e., put their names on a list maintained by the government) for wearing the hijab. No updated figures were available as of the end of the year.

On January 19, the Chief of the Department of Internal Affairs in Khatlon Region, Bahrom Sharifzoda, told reporters that in 2015 authorities had shut down 162 shops selling women's religious clothing which did not meet national traditions. According to Sharifzoda, as a result of joint efforts undertaken with other local authorities, 6,873 local women had stopped wearing hijabs and clothing "alien to Tajik custom." He said during 2015 the authorities had detained 89 women wearing hijabs who were involved in prostitution, which observers said was an attempt to lower the public status of women wearing hijabs. Sharifzoda reported authorities in Khatlon conducted various educational events aimed at encouraging women to wear traditional national clothing.

The Ulema Council in August published an article on its website recommending Tajik brides wear "traditional" dresses at their weddings. In response to a reader's

question, the council stated wearing a Western wedding dress was also permissible and would not affect the sanctity of an Islamic marriage ceremony.

Officials reportedly continued to inspect bookstores, newsstands, kiosks, markets, and mosques to confiscate illegal religious materials. The government continued to allow vendors to sell basic Islamic texts, including the Quran, the Hadith, the history of the Prophet, and prayer books, but did not permit vendors to sell Shia literature, Sunni texts considered non-Hanafi, or audio and video disks featuring unregistered imams. Leaders of the Jehovah's Witnesses, some Baptist congregations, and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), stated they had difficulty bringing religious literature into the country. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists both said the authorities seized their literature, and the Baptists said they had to pay fines for "possession of unvetted religious material." In the case of the ROC, local priests reported Russian Orthodox Bishop Pitirim had to appeal to President Emomali Rahmon to get a large shipment of books released. The Ismaili Shia community stated its organization had experienced no problems receiving prompt CRA clearance for its religious materials.

In May police seized Jehovah's Witness literature and submitted it for review to three Muslim imam-khatibs who ruled the literature was an "incitement to religious strife" because it stated the Jehovah's Witnesses practiced the "true" faith. As of the end of the year, the materials remained banned.

During his January 12 press conference, CRA First Deputy Chairman Ghiyosov stated the CRA had printed 14,000 brochures on the dangers of "extremist" movements and parties, and had disseminated the brochures at the major markets in Dushanbe and at central Friday mosques throughout the country. In response to 117 requests from religious groups, Ghiyosov said, the CRA had analyzed 399 items of literature, 36 notebooks, one religious calendar for 2015, and 1049 leaflets of religious content. He said the CRA had approved 312 of the items of literature, seven of the notebooks and 783 of the leaflets, while determining the remainder of the items contained illegal content.

At the beginning of the year, the Prosecutor General's Office announced the construction of new mosques would be allowed only in those neighborhoods where there was no other mosque nearby.

At a July 20 press conference, the acting chief of the Sughd Regional Department of Religious Affairs, Suhrob Rustamzoda, announced the government closure of

five madrassahs which had been in suspended status since June 2013. He said the madrassahs had not met requirements for providing religious education.

During the year, authorities strengthened efforts to address “illegal” religious studies by citizens at overseas institutions. During a January 12 press conference, CRA First Deputy Chairman Ghiyosov stated 3,006 students involved in “illegal” religious studies abroad had returned to the country as a result of measures taken by the government, in particular by the CRA. He expressed concern about 57 students whom he said had returned to schools abroad and were still studying illegally. From the total number of returned students, he said 66 were found guilty of crimes and were imprisoned. He said 25 of those were imprisoned for involvement in terrorist political parties and movements both inside and outside the country. He provided no details as to exactly what measures the government had taken to convince the students to return, the dates when the students returned, or when the 66 had been imprisoned. According to Ghiyosov, data gathered by the MFA and SCNS indicated 466 students were still studying abroad illegally, primarily in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

A Sughd Region official stated 649 Sughd residents had studied at religious institutions in Islamic countries abroad. He said 630 of them had returned to the country while 19 students had not done so and continued to study at foreign religious institutions. According to Rustamzoda, 39 of those who had returned had then gone back abroad to continue their studies. He provided no details as to exactly when the 649 had first gone abroad or how long the 630 had stayed abroad before returning home.

On February 29, the Tajik Islamic University warned its students against contact with “extremist” groups. A statement released by the university stated the university had information about some students using their mobile phones to watch videos released by such groups, including the IRPT. The university’s statement said this was a violation of law and students with ties to “extremists and terrorists” would be expelled from the university and criminal proceedings would be brought against them.

On January 11, Minister of Education and Science Nuriddin Said announced the ministry had introduced a new course entitled the “history of religion” for ninth grade students. The textbook for this course had already been printed in Tajik and the ministry intended to publish it in Russian and Uzbek. Komil Isoev, Director of the Center on Drafting, Printing, and Dissemination of School Textbooks for the Ministry of Education and Science, told the media the majority of young people

were susceptible to radical messaging because they lacked knowledge of the content and concepts of religion. Isoev stated the government considered introduction of the course into school curriculum necessary so young people would become familiar with world religions.

In the context of discussing difficulties minority religious groups were having in trying to comply with the provisions of the law on the religious education of minors, leaders of the groups reported conversations with government officials in which the officials continued to state the provisions of the law were not meant to apply to their organizations, but to the Hanafi Sunni population instead.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Individuals outside of the government said they were reluctant to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or discrimination on the basis of religious belief. Civil society representatives were prepared to discuss government detentions of individuals who were deemed “extremists,” but they said discussion of religion in general, especially relations between various religious groups, remained a subject they avoided. People said they felt more comfortable discussing violations of civil rights rather than sectarian disagreements.

Leaders of some minority religious groups stated their communities had positive relationships with the majority Hanafi Sunni population who did not hinder their worship services or cause concern for their parishioners. Other minority religious group leaders, especially from proselytizing religious groups, stated their members experienced social disapproval from friends and neighbors and were viewed by others as not “authentically Tajik” because they had ceased being Muslims. None of the leaders, however, reported instances of physical abuse or harassment.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers and visiting U.S. officials met with government officials and the CRA to encourage them to adhere to their international commitments to respect freedom of religion and belief. In their meetings with government officials, embassy officers continued to raise the restrictions on minors and women participating in religious services, rejection of attempts by minority religions to register their organizations, restrictions on the religious education of youth, and limitations on the publication or import of religious literature, as well as the lack of

due process in court cases involving religious extremism. Embassy officers also raised the issue of harassment of women wearing religious dress.

From July 17 to 22, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited the country and met with CRA Chairman Davlatzoda; Saidmukarram Abdulqodirzoda, Chairman of the Ulema Council; Mansur Bukhorizoda, Deputy Chief of the International Cooperation Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs; and Vafo Niyatbekov, the Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department for Information, Press, Analysis, and Foreign Policy Planning. In all of these meetings, the Ambassador at Large raised U.S. concerns about the government's restrictions on registration for minority religious organizations and on youth participation in public religious activities and religious education. The Ambassador at Large also raised concerns over prohibitions against women attending mosques, restrictions on religious literature, and harassment of women wearing religious dress and men wearing beards. The Ambassador at Large urged the government to adhere to its international obligations and suggested the government take steps to address the issues which had led to the country's CPC designation.

Embassy officers and the visiting Ambassador at Large met with representatives of religious groups and civil society to discuss their ongoing concerns about the government's restrictions on participation in religious services, wearing religious attire, religious literature, and religious education. In addition, embassy officers met frequently with representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss their continuing attempts to reregister their organization. Embassy officers also met with representatives from the Baptist Church, ROC, the Ismaili community, the Catholic Church, and the Jewish community to discuss problems faced by those religious groups.

On June 23, the embassy held its first iftar in two years with religious community leaders as well as government officials responsible for policy on religious issues. Topics of discussion included the designation of the country as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom abuses, and the differences between the nature of government policy and the extent of religious freedom under the current government versus Soviet rule.

On February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State designated Tajikistan a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanied the

designation as required in the important national interest of the United States. On October 31, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.