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A report about increasing religious limitations in Tajikistan

Eurasian Dialogue (26.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cUPUf1> - In 2015-2016 years the religious space had been limited in Tajikistan than before. The base of the religion is a problem for the recent government and It accelerated Its struggles against religious norms using disciplinarian and force structures. In this period officials destroyed more than 2000 mosques or turned them to social places, medical centers, departments of the disciplinarians and force officials, discos and privet houses. This process is continuous. As well as officials opened criminal cases against 1000 religious actives and until writing this report 870 of them were detained and imprisoned with different charges. But the result of the cases of 130 people of them is uncertain for the media yet. Also during this period 30 thousand men were detained from the streets and other social places and were forced to shave their beards.

The officials of the Committee of women and family of Tajikistan along with the disciplinarian and the force officials forced more than 10 thousand women and girls not to put on their religious hijabs. The officials of the government closed up all of the official and unofficial religious schools and didn't let the teachers and the pupils continue their lessons in such schools. The government charged with spreading extremist believes an only Islamic gymnasium, which had more than 1400 pupils and limited its pupils until 60 persons. The activity of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan has been banned too. This party was charged with extremism and terrorism.

Closing mosques

According to Constitution and other laws of Tajikistan, a mosque is one of the social union that will be built by local people, persons and gracious persons for praying and satisfying other religious demands of the people. The government hasn't any proportions in mosque building beside giving a plot and certificate for building a mosque. The other religious and unreligious unions haven't any proportions in mosque building too. But

government's position towards mosques is as its position towards trade organizations; the servants of the mosques, the other religious unions pay taxes as the trade organizations do and mosques buy the most expensive electricity power too. In spite of Government of Tajikistan limited and made difficult founding and registration all of the religious unions after adopting the Law about freedom of conscience and religious unions in 2009, the Law about the responsibility of the parents in training and behaving of the child in 2011. According to two above mentioned laws, Muslims only can pray at home, in mosques, in shrines, and in cemeteries. As well as, the abovementioned laws ban under 18-year-old persons' participations in worship and religious ceremonies, besides remaining ceremonies.

According to recent Constitution of Tajikistan, religious unions are apart from state and cannot interfere in state affairs. But in 2014 Government of Tajikistan assigned salary for Imam-Khatib (the orators of mosques) and bound them only to deliver the sermons which will be given by the Committee of religious affairs. Most of those sermons were political and especially were delivered against Emamali Rahman's rivals during two last years. So the government turned mosque's tribunes to Its agitation tribunes, though this measure was unlawful. Simultaneous the government strengthened its watch over the prayers and ordered the officials of the religious unions to fix cameras in mosques and give them necessary information about prayers when they need. July 3, 2015, the Chief of the Special Unit of the Ministry of internal affairs Barotali Hamidzadeh while his speech in Central Mosque of Dushanbe city said, this ministry has its spies among the prayers. He added: "Who doesn't observe praying discipline and walks out in the middle of the pray, he will be counted the member of the illegal groups and will be taken measures against his act".

July 31, 2015, the Attorney General of Tajikistan proclaimed, that there are 1032 legal mosques were turned into culture and relief centers. After 9 months, March 9, 2016, the Attorney General noticed once more again, that 927 mosques were changed to cultural centers, but 638 other Illegal mosques are open for the prayers.

One and half month before the Attorney General's announcement, on the 22nd of January 2016 the President Emamali Rahman proclaimed about an activity of the 1470 Illegal mosques in Tajikistan too.

As experts, corruption paralyzed economic infrastructures in Tajikistan and government cannot build culture, medical and relief centers for citizens' relax, for this It turns mosques to culture, medical and relief centers.

Limitations to hajj

Last years to a trip to Saudi Arabia from Tajikistan became one of the most expensive trips in Central Asia and even Russia⁶. A pilgrimage to holy Mecca became a source of corruption in Tajikistan. Several officials have been charged with corruption related to a pilgrimage to hajj. "Somon air" one of the companies of Tajikistan which monopolized to take pilgrims to hajj last years. The company's owner is Emamali Rahman's family and all pilgrims have to take return ticket from the company. Therefore everybody who wants to trip to Mecca easily can't get any quotas.

Before this, Committee of the religious affairs, regulation of the national traditions and ceremonies has taken other measures related to a pilgrimage to Mecca too. This Committee limited touristic organizations (besides Rasul Sokhtmon Ltd.) to take pilgrims to "Omra" (one of the types of pilgrimage to Mecca which It has not limited time as hajj or pilgrimage in a day of Korban Holiday).

In January 2016, Government of Tajikistan made a resolution which It bans under 40-year-old citizens to trip to hajj. Before, April 14, 2015, Committee of the religious affairs,

regulation of the national traditions and ceremonies banned under 35-year-old citizens' pilgrimage to hajj.

To shave beards and to ban to be bearded

To have a beard is one of the famous national tradition of the people in the Word. Therefor Tajik men according to their wishes put a beard in various styles too. But the beard, the natural hair of men has been known as an enemy of the disciplinarian and force officials in Tajikistan. The officials claim bearded is extremism symbol. So they have begun their fight against bearded in 2013. This process was accelerated rather than expectation in 2014 -2015. Force and disciplinarian officials organizing raids on bearded men detained them and got their fingerprints and their explanations. After such acts, of course, the beards of the detained bearded was shaved forcibly by officials. Such actions of the authorities were proclaimed as pressure by experts and media.

On the 19th of January 2016, the Chief of the Department of the Interior Ministry in Khatlon region Bahram Sahrifzadeh proclaimed that the officials of the Interior Ministry "set up" the beards of 12 818 men in this region (actually they were detained and their beards were shaven forcibly). The officials of this ministry took a widespread shaving beards action in Dushanbe city, in nearby districts of the capital, Sughd, and Badakhshan regions, but when the matter received massive amount foreign and local media coverage, the ministry didn't announce its shaving-beards statistics in other regions of the country. According to our sources in Dushanbe, the officials of the Interior Ministry forced more than 43 thousand men to shave their beards from 2013 until 2016. Only in 2015, the officials could shave 30 thousand men's beard. Even the teachers of the Islamic Institute and Imam -Khatebs (orators of mosques) was advised to shave their beards or not to have it high. Officials' such fights are continuous yet, but the process decreased than 2014-2015.

On the 28th of August 2015 officials of the Department of the Interior Ministry in Vahdat town detained and tortured 23-year old Omar Babajanov. As his relatives, he was detained and tortured for his beard by officials of the Interior Ministry Department. As a result, he died in a hospital on the 5th of September 2015.

Hijab and religious clothing problems

The government of Tajikistan, first of all, President Emomali Rahmon have unlike attitude towards Islamic clothing. On the 7th of March 2015, President proclaimed "unlearned" to put on hijab and affirmed, "the women who put on hijabs have gone astray and don't know what to do". His speech was shown by "Shabakai Avval" (First Channel) of the governmental TV. It wasn't the only insult of the Heads of the government to women who put on hijabs. Before Abdujabbor Rahmonzadeh, the former minister of education and recent advisor of the President said "monkeys" the women who put on hijabs.

While he was a minister of science always had conflicts with the students who put on hijabs. Women who put on hijabs can't take part in governmental assemblies and also can't go to schools and universities too. Even girls who are the students of the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan were advised to put on national clothes. They must don't put on hijabs too.

The government of Tajikistan takes under pressure the Muslim women and insults them to offer excuses observing to develop national clothes. But they have not such attitude with the women and the girls who put on non-national, European clothes as the women who put on hijabs. Also, non-Muslim women who put on as orthodox Christians and Catholic missionaries are allowed.

According to President resolutions against women who put on hijabs, Committee of women and family, disciplinarian and force structures' raids took place in Khujand and other districts too. Such raids called "house to house" for "heedful" national clothes. Such "heedful" raids took place in the parks too. "According to a report of "Asia Plus" News Agency law enforcement officials "agitated" to throw down their hijabs. They proclaimed, their agitation is a part of the national ceremony". From the beginning 2016 Interior Ministry Department in Sughd region organized 7 groups consisted of 222 officials of this department for raids against the women who put on hijabs. As a result, the officials of the Interior Ministry Department registered 643 women who put on hijabs (officials registered them as addicts and criminals)¹³. Before this, the Chief of the Interior Ministry Department in Khatlon region Bahram Sharifzadeh reported, in a result of "heedful" raids of the department 1772 women and girls gave up to put on hijabs in 2015 year. As well as was rejected 162 shops' activities, which there was sold religious clothes.

For proceeding such pressures Bevaliye Hakimbekova, one of the inhabitants of Babajan Ghafurov district told Radio Freedom, during last five years tried to take passport with the picture which she put on hijab in it, but couldn't. Her interview was published on the 5th of March 2015.

The government limited the shop's activities which have been sold Islamic clothes there during last two years. In the case many of the Islamic clothes sellers, who brought their goods from other countries are broke.

Related to this problem the court of Isfara town imprisoned 31-year-old Oqil Sarifov for a year. His only "crime" was to take photos from the detaining process of the women who put on hijabs in Isfara town.

Religious teaching limitations

The Muslim inhabitants of the Central Asian countries, particularly the citizens of Tajikistan will be taught by local priests in mosques or at home. In Soviet Union times when teaching religion prohibited, priests taught children in basements, because they felt afraid. The recent leadership of Government of Tajikistan who many of them are soviet personnel accelerated their fight. Such authorities are an opposition of the religion and they don't want to develop religious mindful of the people.

The Government signed two above mentioned laws and limited religious teaching completely. Everybody who was detained was punished, of course, If the teacher or the priest hadn't special license for teaching religion. There are eight legal religious schools and tens of Illegal were prohibited. Committee of religion along with Ministry of Education banned only Islamic gymnasium which had more than 1400 pupils. 60 of them who was last year pupils were transferred to Islamic Institute.

As well as all of the students who studied in foreign Islamic universities abroad have been returned. Also who studied abroad without permission of the government and were not in accord with Ministry of Education and Science, has been returned and punished too.

In the beginning of February, authorities detained Shohrat Qazebaev with his 11 students. Qazebaev graduated one of the Islamic universities abroad. They were the habitants of Khujand city and Babajan Gafurov district. It was opened criminal cases against them.

In summer 2009, when the Law about freedom of conscience and religious unions was adopted, has been strengthened watch over the spreading religious audio, video, and printed materials; also has been found a special state center for checking religious materials before the print. According to Law about freedom of conscience and religious

unions, article 17, all of the religious books and booklets, which will be brought abroad or printed in Tajikistan, must be checked out before the print. In this case, unchecked religious literature will not be given license for sell and considered outlaw.

Rejecting stranger names and relative marriage

According to statistic, 99% of Tajikistan's people are Muslims. Therefore many of the citizens choose Islamic names for their children, but they have not such right now. As new amendments to the Law about register a marriage, Arabic names were announced contrary to national culture.

Relative marriage is one of the Tajik people's traditional marriages. The God and Prophet Muhammad let such marriages. The 16th article of the UN Human Rights Declaration didn't ban relative marriages too. Though the government of Tajikistan adopted this declaration, parliament of Tajikistan adopted new amendments to Family code of Tajikistan, which prohibit relative marriage.

Religious activities limitations

During two last years, religious activities have been limited more than past years. During this period were closed Turajanzadeh brothers' website. Nuriddin Turajanzadeh, Haji Akbar Turajanzadeh, and Mahmud Jan Turajanzadeh are the known and influential priests in Tajikistan. They teach and agitate religion. In addition, several Islamic websites were closed and their founders punished. Also, several other founders of the religious websites have been pressured to close their websites. Particularly the founder of the "Vasatiyat" website rejected Its activity in a result of such pressures.

At the first time, the USA added Tajikistan in a list of "Special anxieties countries" (the countries which trample on the religious freedom) along with Iran, Sudan and North Korea on the 14th of March 2016. Before the USA announced Tajikistan as the country which represses clergies to offer excuses extremism. On the 10th of August 2016 USCIRF criticized "Government of Tajikistan for limitations religious freedom not only for Muslims, even for Protestants and ... Christians". Then Tajikistan was added in a list of "Special anxieties countries" by the USA.

Detaining and imprisoning

According to Constitution of Tajikistan, "everybody has a right to choose every religion, have a right to follow every religion alone or along with others, have a right to participate in religious ceremonies". But during two last years religious actives who made a step out of force and disciplinarian officials' orders and wishes, were charged with membership in Muslim Brothers, Salafi Movement, Hizb utTahrir, Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan and imprisoned. For example, on the 15th of July 2016, the public prosecutor of Sughd region Habibullah Vohidov announced that they opened criminal cases against 16 orators of mosques during last six months. Simultaneous 110 religious actives were detained and imprisoned charging for following Salafi Movement²⁶. The court of Ismoili Somoni district of Dushanbe city sentenced Muharramov Muhammadi Rahmatulloevich (he was known as Muhammadi Rahmatulloh) to 8 years imprisonment. He was the head of Salafists in Tajikistan. As well as Interior Ministry Department in Sughd region announced about detaining of 245 persons charging for membership in the Hizb ut-Tahrir. Also, 226 persons were detained charging for following Salafi Movement. All of them have been imprisoned. In addition, 7 orators of mosques have been detained too. They were charged to follow Muslim Brothers and Salafi Movement. Religious active's detaining escalated rather than expectation in this region. For example on the 9th of August of 2016 Anvarjon Ibrohimov, the public prosecutor of this region announced detaining from 20 215 suspicious persons who only two of them were not found guilty by the court during first six months.

In the beginning of March of 2016 disciplinarian and force officials of Tajikistan detained 35 inhabitants from the mosque at once. On the 8th of August Court of Ismoili Somoni district sentenced 18 of them to 3,5 -10 years imprisonment. One of them is Rajabmurod Rajabov. He is 19 years old. He was detained for his bear. Officials charged him for putting bear as Salafists in 2009. But his brother refuted officials claim. He told Freedom Radio: "In 2009 my brother was in the sixth form. What kind of reality are the officials positions? All of us know that pupil in the sixth will not be bearded physically".

During 2015-2016 years about 200 members of IRPT, leaders and their relatives were detained. They were charged with participation in the criminal group, national, racial and religious hostility exciting, assassination, terrorism, to invite for overturning constitutional structure, keeping and transmission weapons, armed mutiny, and their court was held behind the closed doors. Of course, the details of their court process was hidden. At last, 75-years-old Kurban Mannonov and 55-year-old Nozimjon Tashripov have tortured and died in prison.

The force officials of Tajikistan detained about 200 persons charging them to the partnership to the group of Haji Halim, former ex-minister of defense after the occasions on the 4th of September 2015. All of them who have been detained, imprisoned charging with the coup. Many of them were relatives or kept cooperation and friendship with the members of Haji Halim's group in the past, but official detained and charged them that eventuality they kept informed of the coup, but didn't inform the officials.

There are hundreds were imprisoned charging with extremism in Tajikistan last five years, but officials have no any true and logical definitions about this social phenomenon.

Religious freedom in Tajikistan: Jehovah's Witnesses attempt to have a constructive dialogue with the authorities

HRWF (26.09.2016) – During the first week of the OSCE/ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses (EAJCW) pursued its constructive dialogue with the Tajik authorities in order to try to restore their registration cancelled in 2007 and to provide the local Jehovah's Witnesses with a legal framework for the full exercise of their freedom of religion or belief.

Statement of the EAJCW on 21 September

"Jehovah's Witnesses have been without legal registration since 2007. As a result, the Tajikistan government views the Witnesses' religious activity as illegal. All levels of the judicial system have dismissed reregistration attempts. Without legal status, authorities deny Jehovah's Witnesses the right to conduct religious meetings and assemblies, to own or use property for religious purposes, to produce and import religious literature, to receive donations, to carry out charitable activity, and to invite foreign citizens to participate in religious events.

The UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) recommended in its Concluding Observations on the second periodic report of Tajikistan (22 August 2013) that Jehovah's Witnesses be granted re-registration (CCPR/C/TJK/CO/2, paragraph 20), stating that "the State party should reverse its discriminatory refusal to register certain religious denominations."

Abuses and restrictions of religious freedom

Interference with religious services

(1) Khujand. On 3 May 2016, Jehovah's Witnesses were holding a religious meeting with 86 people in attendance, including children. At the conclusion of the meeting, National Security Committee officers, local police, and representatives of the Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA) raided the meeting and made a video recording of all in attendance. The officers were aggressive and rude, and some of those in attendance were assaulted. One of the female Witnesses was severely beaten. She documented all of her bruises and filed a complaint against the actions of the police, but she did not receive an official response. After two hours of questioning and a search of their belongings, attendees were allowed to leave.

On 18 May 2016, two of the victims were found guilty under Article 474-1, par. 3, of the Administrative Code of the Republic of Tajikistan (illegal production of religious literature) and were each fined TJS 280 (approximately EUR 31). An appeal was filed and is pending.

(2) Tursun-Zade (Regar). On 6 March 2016, police officers raided a religious meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses held in a private home. They arrested all 30 individuals in attendance and detained them for six hours. During the interrogation, the officers beat, threatened, and assaulted many of the attendees, including minor children. Some of the male Witnesses were tortured with Tasers. When one of the victims lost consciousness, the police called the Emergency Medical Service (EMS). The EMS administered treatment, but the police paid them TJS 150 (approximately EUR 16) and asked them not to record any of the injuries. The police purposefully inflicted blows so as to leave minimum visual indicators. Those who were beaten sought medical attention and took photographs of their injuries. A complaint was filed with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), the General Prosecutor's Office, and the Ombudsman. The MIA started an investigation of the incident. Subsequently, the police officers apologized to the victims, and the complaint was withdrawn. Nevertheless, administrative cases were commenced against two Witnesses, and the cases are still pending.

Restrictions resulting from religious beliefs

Tursun-Zade (Regar). On 5 January 2016, one of Jehovah's Witnesses wished to bury her deceased husband according to her religious beliefs as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Relatives knew that the family are Jehovah's Witnesses but nevertheless demanded that the deceased be buried in the Muslim cemetery. The Witness asked them not to intervene, but the family filed a complaint with the head of the Housing Services Department (HSD). The funeral was recorded by HSD representatives.

On 13 March 2016, a Witness who assisted at the funeral was summoned to the State Committee of National Security (KGB). During his interrogation, Jehovah's Witnesses were accused of instigating religious strife. The KGB representatives threatened him and later tried to search his apartment without a warrant. They threatened the Witness with criminal charges, but the case was later closed.

Legal recognition withheld

On 11 October 2007, the Ministry of Culture deregistered Jehovah's Witnesses. As a result, the government of Tajikistan views all religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses as illegal. Jehovah's Witnesses have filed for registration numerous times since October 2007. The CRA has denied each application on technicalities, most recently in October 2014. In 2012 the Witnesses submitted a complaint to the CCPR on the deregistration issue and expect a decision in the near future. At the 2015 OSCE HDIM Conference, the Tajikistan delegation stated publicly that Jehovah's Witnesses had not fully exhausted domestic remedies to appeal the deregistration decision.

On 25 February 2016, in response to the direction given by the Tajik authorities, the Witnesses filed an appeal of the deregistration decision with the Chairman of the Supreme Court.

On 8 April 2016, the Supreme Court informed the Witnesses that the Chairman of the Supreme Court had rejected the appeal.

Meetings with officials

On 5 July 2016, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses met with the Tajikistan Presidential Administration (PA). The PA was represented by Mr Sharaf Karimzoda, who is the acting head of the Human Rights Guarantees Department, and Mr Zafar Safalizoda, who specializes in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Witnesses discussed their attempts to register and the CRA's denial of their registration on technical grounds. The PA representatives assured them that they would discuss these matters with their superiors, with the new head of the CRA, and with Mr Valizoda, the head of the PA's Religious Issues Department. The representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses have not yet received a response.

Religious freedom objectives

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Tajikistan to:

- (1) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to register their local religious organisation
- (2) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses legally to import and use their religious literature
- (3) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses peacefully to practice their religious beliefs and to share them with their neighbours. Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of the Tajikistan government.

For more information: Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses at generalcounsel@jw.org

The full statement was uploaded by the OSCE on its website: <http://bit.ly/2d2EqJk>

Tajikistan draws up list of hijab-wearers

Eurasianet (22.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bpMfbf> - Police in Tajikistan have taken to drawing up lists of women known to wear the hijab in a fresh measure to combat signs of what they perceive as excess Islamic piety.

Asia-Plus news last week cited the head of police in the northern city of Khujand, Emin Jalilov, as saying that raids have been mounted in markets with the aim of maintaining security and upholding national customs. That translates in practical terms to clamping down on any clothing deemed suggestive of radical Islamic beliefs.

"During raids we found that at 38 retail points in the city there were saleswomen wearing (veils)," Jalilov said.

Jalilov noted with regret that many bazaar directors are failing to clamp down on the phenomenon.

"At the moment, the city police has a list of 643 women that wear the hijab. Of those, 513 are residents of the city. These neighborhoods are under the close supervision of the police," he said.

Authorities are always eager to stress that the threat is not hypothetical but real.

As Jalilov noted, 30 residents of Khujand have been detained on suspicion of associating with radical and terrorist Islamic groups so far this year. At least 245 members of the banned Hizb ut-Tahrir group and 226 followers of the Salafi movement have been recorded in Khujand, he said. Most of those have received criminal sentences of some kind.

These figures are of questionable value, however, given how arbitrarily police and courts assign membership status in underground groups to anybody they deem even mildly suspicious. True membership or affiliation figures may be much smaller, or for that matter, much greater.

In its latest annual report, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom provides a detailed portrait of the steady decline of religious freedoms in Tajikistan, including of its impact on women.

"Between 2004 and 2014, the Council of Ulema banned women from attending mosques. In 2014, it said it would allow women to attend mosques and female students at religious schools to become imam-hatibs (imams' assistants) to work with females at mosques with women-only sections," noted the report, which is well worth reading in full.

Capillary policing in the community is set to be intensified in the coming weeks as Tajikistan prepares to celebrate the 25th anniversary of its independence. The Interior Ministry warned in a statement earlier this month that it plans to introduce what it calls a "passport regime." Police will go from door to door to check on who is in possession of a propiska, the Soviet-devised document authorizing citizens to live in given locations.

Tajikistan, where wearing hijab is a crime

643 women in Tajikistan have been placed on a police list after committing the "crime" of wearing a hijab

World Bulletin (20.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cpxjHm> - Chief of the Interior Ministry's office in Khujand, the capital of Sughd province, Colonel Emin Jalilov has said that 685 crimes have been reported in the city over the first seven months of this year. Of this number, 643 women wearing hijab are now registered with Interior Ministry's office in Khujand; 513 of them are residents of the city of Khujand.

Ex-Soviet Tajikistan regularly monitors and cracks down on any symbol that is deemed to be in opposition to the state. In February footage of police arresting two hijab-sporting women quickly gathered traction on the Russian social network Odnoklassniki and YouTube, angering ordinary Tajiks in the majority Muslim country. Russian citizen Oqil Sharifov was charged with "provocation of enmity based on nationalism, regionalism, and religion" and sentenced on May 26 to a year in prison.

Imprisonments "designed to scare the population"

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (19.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bOKdQR> - With imprisonments of Muslims for up to 16 years, Tajikistan's officials refuse to explain what crimes they committed. Punishments are "designed to scare population away from the Salafi movement and Islamic Renaissance Party, or any active movement spreading Islam," rights defenders told Forum 18.

Since early 2016 Tajikistan has been conducting mass raids and arrests targeting alleged followers of the Salafi Muslim movement across the country, particularly in the northern Sogd Region and in and around the capital Dushanbe, human rights defenders who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18. However, the authorities have repeatedly refused to say what crimes – if any – the men might have committed.

Since the beginning of 2016, courts handed down prison sentences to at least 55 Muslim men, many of whom were accused of participating in the activity of and spreading the teachings of the Salafi movement. One Judge in Khujand in Sogd Region alone in February convicted 46 men accused of being members of various Muslim movements. The longest known sentence of 16 years' imprisonment was handed down in Dushanbe. Those sentenced include Imams of mosques appointed with the approval of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) (see below).

Among those awaiting trial and possible imprisonment are seven Imams of Cathedral Mosques in Sogd Region, Faizinisso Vokhidova, human rights defender and lawyer of one of the Imams, told Forum 18 on 16 May (see below).

Tajikistan has repeatedly punished people (notably Muslims) exercising their freedom of religion or belief for their alleged ideas, not their actions. Questioned by Forum 18, officials have repeatedly refused to explain what alleged crimes the Muslims targeted have committed. This is part of the state's attempts to impose total state control of Muslims and others exercising freedom of religion and belief.

This control is continuing using mosque demolitions, surveillance cameras, metal detectors, a ban on state employees at Friday prayers, and youth activists to prevent prayers not in Hanafi or Ismaili tradition.

"Designed to scare the population away"

The government appears determined to stamp out any remaining followers or activity of the Salafi, Tabligh Jamaat and other Muslim movements banned in the country, as well as the banned Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Forum 18 notes.

The Supreme Court banned Salafi Islam in a ruling that came into force in February 2009, even though an official admitted to Forum 18 that adherents of the Salafi school of Islamic thought had committed no crimes.

"In many cases it will be enough for the Police to arrest people if they see them wear short trousers or long beards," one human rights defender told Forum 18.

"The purpose of the arrests and imprisonments is to publicise widely the harassment and lengthy prison terms," several human rights defenders, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 12 May. "It is also designed to scare the population away from the Salafi movement and Islamic Renaissance Party, or any active movement teaching or preaching and spreading Islam." They explained that though the "authorities on purpose try to avoid mentioning the name of the IRP publicly, but when they speak against illegal Islamic parties they mean it."

The IRP was until it was banned in August 2015 Central Asia's only legal faith-based political party.

The human rights defenders added that in some cases it may also be that local authorities "seize this chance and arrest innocent Muslims and later release them, having extorted money from them."

Arrested for being active Muslims

The arrested Muslim men (or their relatives) deny any wrongdoing and complain that they were arrested for being active Muslims, teaching and spreading Islam, as well as for wearing long beards and Islamic dress.

Arrests of followers and alleged followers of the Salafi movement across the country continue, an observer from Tajikistan told Forum 18 on 12 May. "Some of those arrested are released after signing Police reports of Salafi activity and a statement promising that they will not in future be involved in Salafi or any other active Muslim movements," they said, "but many are still kept under arrest."

Court officials confirmed the cases to Forum 18 but declined to give any comments besides telling it and other media that the defendants were punished for being Salafi followers.

Asked why so many Muslims have been arrested and imprisoned, the Prosecutor General's Office on 17 May referred Forum 18 to Manuchehr Mahmudzoda, Chief of its International Department.

Mahmudzoda declined to say why the Muslims had been arrested and imprisoned, or to give figures on how many had been released and how many will be punished. "Please, send your questions to our Foreign Ministry," he told Forum 18. "If they think it is politically expedient, they will refer them to us for answers." He then declined to talk further.

Dushanbe: long prison terms for four alleged Salafis

Judge Jurabek Shirinzoda of Dushanbe's Ismoli-Somoni District Court on 14 April handed down prison sentences to four Muslim residents of the District, Romish Boboyev, Otabek Azimov, Abdurahmon Ismoilov and Khurshed Suvanov. The Court announced on its website - without giving details - that all were convicted for being members and participating in the "extremist activity" of the Salafi movement.

Boboyev and Azimov received prison terms of 16 years and 14 years respectively, Judge Shirinzoda told Asiaplus on 15 April. Ismoilov and Suvanov each received three years in prison. "All defendants except Azimov admitted their guilt," the Judge claimed. "Azimov's guilt was also proven during the Court investigation."

Asked what crimes the four men committed, and why they were given such heavy punishments, Judge Gayrat Sanginzoda of Ismoily-Somoni Court, who answered the Court's phone on 17 May refused to comment on the case. "They appealed against our decision, and we cannot comment because they are considered innocent until after the appeal case is heard," he told Forum 18. Sanginzoda also refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Shirinozda or any other officials for comments.

Sogd: long prison terms for imam and four associates

Judge Boir Zoirzoda of Sogd Region's Bobojon Gofurov District Court on 18 April handed down an eight year prison term to 58-year old Imam Khamid Karimov. He leads the

Mosque in Unji-Bobojon village. The Judge handed down seven year prison terms to each of four members of his Mosque, 35-year old Muhammadsayid Sayidov, 34-year old Abdumajid Abdukadirov, 32-year old Mirzomuhammad Rahmatov and 31-year old Farhod Karimov.

Police in Bobojon Gofurov District, where the men live, reportedly arrested all five in January.

All five were convicted under Criminal Code Article 307-3, Part 2, which punishes "participation in the activity of political parties, social or religious organisations, or other organisations, liquidated or banned by a court for extremist activity" with imprisonment of five to eight years. This Article was among several related to "extremism" added to the Criminal Code in December 2015.

In addition, Imam Karimov was also convicted under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media"). Punishments are imprisonment for up to five years. All five men were found guilty of being members of the banned Salafi Muslim movement.

Their "only guilt was active propagation of Islam"

Police told the Court that they found Salafi literature and materials in the men's homes and on electronic devices. "We were told that no evidence was given in Court proving that the Imam and his co-believers did anything criminal or against the State," an individual familiar with the case, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 11 May. "The only thing presented as evidence was that they prayed differently and taught not according to the Hanafi but the Salafi school."

Imam Karimov told the Court that his "only guilt was active propagation of Islam in Sogd and teaching others to do so."

Judge Zoirzoda refused to explain why he gave such heavy punishments to the five men or what crimes – if any - they committed. "They have already appealed and I cannot explain this to you over the phone," he told Forum 18 on 12 May. He claimed he could only talk to Forum 18 about his decision in his office. When Forum 18 asked why he punished the men simply for believing and praying differently from the government-approved form of Islam, he claimed: "You have incorrect information." He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him went unanswered.

However, Judge Zoirzoda told Asiaplus on 19 April without any specifics that the five men were convicted for "calls to extremist activity" and "participation in the activity of a banned organisation".

Judge Zoirzoda elaborated that the five were convicted because "the Imam divided the Mosque into two parts. In one his followers gathered where he preached and taught them the ideas of the Salafi movement, banned in the country. The other part was for regular Mosque-goers." The Judge added that Imam Karimov gathered his followers in his home.

Khujand: 46 Muslims imprisoned for up to 4 years

Between February and May Judge Akmal Savriddinzoda of Sogd Region's Khujand City Court convicted altogether 46 individuals for participating in "extremist activity", he told Forum 18 on 17 May. He said that he heard three cases involving 23, 15 and eight men separately.

The eight men – all local residents aged between 29 and 36 - were arrested by Bobojon Gofurov District Police in October 2015. They were "convicted in late February of being followers of the Salafi movement," Judge Savriddinzoda stated. The hearing took place not in the Court but in the building of Khujand City No.1 Detention Centre. Judge Savriddinzoda refused to give Forum 18 any details of the cases.

Asked exactly what crimes the men committed, the Judge referred Forum 18 to Matluba Rahmatullozoda, Chair of the Court. Rahmatvullozoda's phone went unanswered on 17 May.

Savriddinzoda told Asiaplus on 23 February that the eight Muslims were charged under Criminal Code Article 307-3, Part 2 ("Participation in the activity of political parties, social or religious organisations, or other organisations, liquidated or banned by a court for extremist activity"). He said that the defendants received between 42 and 48 months of imprisonment each in labour camp. "All them voluntarily joined the Salafi movement, spread its ideas, and recruited other residents into the movement."

Sogd: 7 imams await trial

Six Imam-hatyps of cathedral Mosques in Sogd Region were arrested in early March on the initiative of the Regional Prosecutor's Office. The Imams are being held at a Detention Centre in Sogd. All six had been appointed to their posts with the approval of the SCRA.

Sulayman Boltuyev was Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Guliston (former Kayrakkum), Maksud Urunov Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Kanibadam, and Abdujamil Yusupov of the cathedral Mosque in Bobojon Gofurov District. Of the three other unnamed Imams, two are from Khujand and one from Kanibadam.

The case against the six Imams was combined with that of a seventh arrested Imam, the lawyer Vokhidova told Forum 18 on 16 May. She did not know the name of the seventh Imam. The cases were due to be referred to court on 17 May, she added, but did not know which court they would be handed to.

Asked about the case Khurshed Sanginzoda, Chair of Bobojon-Gofurov District Court, told Forum 18 on 13 May that the case of Abdujamil Yusupov who is from Bobojon Gofurov District will "be heard by our Court but the other Imams are from other Districts, and I cannot say anything about them." He said that Yusupov was charged under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

Sanginzoda asked Forum 18 to call back later "when I am in my office, and can say more about the case." However, called back on 17 May, Sanginzoda refused to discuss the case. "I talked with our higher authorities, and was told that I cannot talk to you about the case," he told Forum 18.

Rogun: up to 50 young Muslims arrested

In early March Police in Rogun, 90 kms (55 miles) north-east of Dushanbe, "simultaneously in bath houses, on the streets and in private homes", arrested up to 50 young men aged between 18 and 35, without informing their relatives, catv24, a news agency and internet television channel, reported on 10 March. Police "put sacks on the heads of the arrested" when they were taken to Firdavsi District Police Department in Dushanbe for questioning, it added.

In early March Police arrested 25 residents of the village of Kalai Nav of Rogun alone, an unnamed official of Rogun Administration told Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service on 10 March. Among those arrested were Muboroksho Khasanov, the village Imam-hatyp, and Fazliddin Gadoyev, the village doctor. The arrested men, like the others arrested from Rogun, were brought to Firdavsi Police in Dushanbe.

Friends and relatives told Radio Free Europe that the men were arrested during four days in early March in the village Mosque for "praying the namaz in the Salafi manner".

It published video footage of the parents of some of those arrested who gathered in the morning of 9 March in front of Firdavsi District Police demanding the release of their sons.

Hurinisso Salimova, mother of one of the arrested young men, told independent news agency Asiaplus on 9 March that the Police officers "put a sack on his head" while they arrested him, and took him away. "For several days I have been unaware where my son was taken, she wept," it reported.

Nazrigul Kenjayeva, mother of another of those arrested Ismoil Kenjayev, said her son is only 19 and "still very young". "What wrong could he have done?" she asked. Both mothers told Asiaplus that their sons were arrested on 3 March.

Some relatives told Asiaplus that Firdavsi Police took the food they brought for the arrested men, but "drove them away from the [Police] building".

Avazbek Safarov and Aminjon Musamirov, two of the arrested residents of Kalai-Nav, were released several days later after their relatives met Interior Minister Ramazon Rahimzoda, Radio Free Europe reported on 15 March.

Muhammad Odinayev, Head of the village administration, confirmed the release to the agency on 15 March. But he added: "No one knows whether they and others [from the group] will be freed from responsibility." He claimed that the authorities in Dushanbe are treating the arrested men "according to the Law".

Arrested for how they pray?

Some think their relatives were arrested for wearing long beards, catv24 reported. It cited relatives' question: "How could [Police] see how they prayed when they arrested them not in a Mosque or during prayer?"

Khurshed Shafoyev, Deputy Chief of Firdavsi Police Criminal Investigations Division, denied that the men arrested in Rogun were brought to Firdavsi Police. "We opened a case only against one man from Firdavsi for participating in Salafi activity," he claimed to Forum 18 on 17 May. He declined to give the man's name but said that he was charged under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

Shafoyev refused to tell Forum 18 how many Muslims were detained by Firdvasi Police and how many were released, if any.

Asked why they opened a case against the man, what crime he might have committed, and why so many Salafi and other Muslims were being arrested in Dushanbe and across Tajikistan, Shafoyev replied: "These people teach Islam differently, they propagate extremist ideas, and also speak about overturning the government." He claimed that there is "evidence that they have spoken about it," without giving specific details.

Asked why then the central authorities publicly announced that followers of Salafi and other movements will be freed from responsibility, Shafoyev put the phone down. Subsequent calls to him on the same day went unanswered.

Ministry accuses media of misinformation

On its website on 10 March, the Interior Ministry accused unidentified websites of publishing information about relatives of the arrested Rogun residents gathering in front of Firdavsi Police Station which does "not correspond to reality".

It said that a "few residents of Rogun (and residents of other cities) were arrested for being members of terrorist-extremist organisations and other individuals were invited as witnesses."

"None of the relatives of the arrested and witnesses gathered in front of Firdavsi Police since unauthorised meetings are banned by Law."

However, catv24 objected that there are photographs of the relatives gathered at the police station, noting that "obviously the authorities of Tajikistan think that all these photographs are fake".

Khujand: more imams arrested

Five more imams - Alisher Olimov, Kobil Sanginov, Gufron Anvarov, Dovud Okhunov and Khurshed Bofarov – were arrested in Sogd Region's Kanibadam District between 9 and 14 May, Radio Free Europe noted on 19 May. They are all are being held in Khujand District Police Detention Centre. They are accused of being members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Repentance might lead to release

Muhammadrizo Khalifazoda, Press-Secretary of the General Prosecutor's Office, told Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service on 11 May that tens of Salafi followers who "repented were freed from criminal responsibility." He said that "there is no full list of the individuals but tens of individuals admitted their guilt."

Khalifazoda told the agency that those who joined "extremist" movements within Tajikistan and "admitted their guilt and repented from their actions must tell the authorities about it before the authorities will expose them."

Mustafo Abdurakhimov, 23-year old resident of Vahdat District near Dushanbe, told Radio Free Europe on 11 May that "once he was among Salafi believers but later repented before the law-enforcement organs and avoided prosecution."

The Interior Ministry announced on its website on 11 May that individuals who joined banned "extremist organisations such as Salafi, Tabligh Jamaat, Muslim brotherhood, Ansarulloh, Daesh, and others" will be freed from criminal responsibility based on Criminal Code Articles 307-2 ("participating in") or 307-3 ("organising") "the activity of political parties, social or religious organisations, or other organisations, liquidated or banned by a court for extremist activity", as well as Criminal Code Article 401-1 ("Hiring, training, financing, or other material maintenance of mercenaries") – if they "admit their guilt and sincerely repent, and voluntarily visit the law-enforcement organs and testify that they joined these extremist groups because of ignorance and that they were misled."

The Ministry had also announced earlier that it will use young activists to counter young people from joining "extremist Islamic movements and parties".

Continued state "total control" of Islam

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (06.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bNhAmq> - Mosque demolitions, surveillance cameras, metal detectors, a ban on state employees at Friday prayers, youth activists to prevent prayers not in Hanafi or Ismaili tradition continue state moves aiming to "establish total control of Muslim activity", human rights defenders told Forum 18 from Tajikistan.

Tajikistan's authorities are tightening the already strict control of Muslims who exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 notes. The authorities have installed surveillance cameras in mosques in recent years and are beginning to install metal detectors. The latest state moves aim to "establish total control of Muslim activity" in the country, human rights defenders and independent experts on religious affairs told Forum 18.

While all religious communities remain under tight state control and surveillance, the Muslim community is subjected to special controls. The state imposes Sunni Hanafi Islam as almost the only permitted form of Islam. The one limited exception is for followers of the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam, who live mainly in Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Republic in eastern Tajikistan.

The authorities have already demolished or closed down hundreds of prayer rooms and mosques in the capital Dushanbe, and seem set to continue to do so. Interior Minister Lieutenant General Ramazon Khamro Rahimzoda told a 25 January press conference that about 900 out of an estimated 1,500 prayer rooms and mosques in the city had been closed down.

At an Interior Ministry round table on 3 March, Minister Rahimzoda told participants that groups of young activists will work in mosques as volunteers and, in cooperation with law-enforcement agencies, will help catch "extremists", as well as those who do not pray according to Hanafi or Ismaili traditions.

Sadullo Karimzoda, Chief of the Legal Department of Dushanbe City Administration, dismissed concerns about the installation of surveillance cameras in the city's mosques. He told Forum 18 on 26 April that the authorities have been installing them at least for the last three years. He refused to explain why metal detectors are needed.

In 2015 the authorities banned state employees from attending Friday prayers and sermons, even during their lunch hour. One official denied the ban to Forum 18. Others refused to say who ordered such a ban and why.

Police routinely crack down on men with beards and women wearing the hijab headscarf. Okil Sharipov was arrested in Isfara in Sogd Region for filming Police harassment in February of a group of women who wore hijabs. He is in prison awaiting possible trial under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 ("Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media").

President Emomali Rahmon has ruled the country since 1992 and his rule has been marked by multiple human rights violations, little sign of the rule of law, and hostility to democracy including electoral fraud. His People's Democratic Party (PDPT) has 51 out of the total of 63 deputies in the lower house of parliament, while the now-banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) has no deputies. The IRP was Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party. Secular civil society organisations, even those not working on political or human rights issues, spoke to a human rights defender known to Forum 18 of a climate of fear before the elections.

"Total control"

Saodat Olimova of the independent Sharq (Orient) Religious Studies Centre in Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 26 April that the ban on officials attending Friday prayers came "because the authorities want to liquidate all the outward expression of religion in the country".

Independent human rights defender Rustam Gulov told Forum 18 from Khujand in the northern Sogd Region on 3 May that Muslims are being "directed to fewer, bigger mosques in cities, where cameras will track their activity and volunteer civilians will help the law-enforcement agencies to catch alleged extremists who do not pray according to the Hanafi Islamic school. This is total control."

"With the help of the cameras in mosques, the authorities can also track men who wear long beards, women who wear hijabs, those under 18 or government officials who attend prayers," Gulov added.

Gulov and Muzafar Olimov, an expert of Sharq Research Centre, separately told Forum 18 that they have seen notices at the entrances of mosques warning that attendees can pray in them only according to Hanafi rules. Olimov said he had seen such signs in Dushanbe, while Gulov said he had seen them in Dushanbe as well as various cities in Sogd Region, including Khujand and Isfara. Both described this to Forum 18 as "discrimination".

"I understand the authorities may want to catch those who pray differently or propagate ideas of Islam different from the Hanafi school, or even those who are extremists, but to put a notice like that on the mosques is not normal based on Sharia Law," Olimov told Forum 18 on 4 May. "If this was right then adherents of various Islamic schools should not go together on the Haj pilgrimage [to Mecca]."

"All the mosques officially allowed to function preach and teach based on the Hanafi or Ismaili school," human rights defender Gulov told Forum 18. "This is discrimination against thousands of Muslims who adhere to a variety of Muslim schools."

Ismaili Muslims in Badakhshan pray only in homes, an Ismaili Muslim told Forum 18 from the region on 6 May. He said all the mosques there are Hanafi Sunni. The Ismaili Centre in Dushanbe is the only place where Ismailis can meet publicly to exercise freedom of religion or belief together, he added.

Why closures and demolitions of Dushanbe prayer rooms?

"The authorities only close down prayer rooms which do not have proper legal paperwork and do not correspond to the general architecture of the city," Karimzoda of Dushanbe City Administration insisted to Forum 18. He refused to give the exact number of closed prayer rooms or mosque). He also refused to comment on whether this is not a violation of Muslims' freedom of religion or belief, and then declined to talk further to Forum 18.

Olimova of Sharq Research Centre explained that in earlier years people, using their religious freedom, built and opened numerous prayer rooms in residential areas, often without properly legalising the buildings. "Later on some of them were able to receive registration, but many could not," she told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 26 April. "Now is a good opportunity for the authorities to close them down, citing legal justification. But this is against the religious rights of people guaranteed by the Constitution."

Young activists to catch those who do not pray Hanafi or Ismaili style

The Interior Ministry announced on 3 March that "from now on groups of young activists will work in mosques". The announcement came at a round table arranged by Interior Minister Rahimzoda that day, and reported on the Interior Ministry website the same day (seen by Forum 18 on 20 April and later).

Participants of the round table - who included scholars, Imam-hatyps of mosques, the state-sponsored Muslim Board, leaders of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA), as well as officers of the law-enforcement agencies - discussed the "reasons of the young people's involvement in extremist parties and movements", the Interior Ministry website noted.

"The purpose of the event is to prevent youth from getting involved in illegal parties and movements, explanation of the true meaning of the religion of Islam," the Interior Ministry said. A proposal was made to create groups of young activists, "members of which will explain to the population the essence of the religion of Islam, the hadith [sayings attributed to the Muslim prophet Muhammad], and the prophets".

"These groups in cooperation with the law-enforcement agencies will help prevent youth from joining various extremist organisations, and will help detain those individuals who sow discord among the population and go against the state and national values."

On 25 January, the Interior Ministry reported that a group of young activists named "Avant-garde" helped to reveal 21 cases of "illegally" teaching religion.

However, on 5 March independent news agency Avesta.tj, citing the Ministry website, reported that "young Tajiks are asking [the authorities] to help create a special youth taskforce to train the population how to pray according to the Hanafi Muslim school."

The news agency cited the Ministry as declaring that 400 young people who pray the namaz made a proposal at the round table "to create a special youth group to cooperate with the law-enforcement agencies. Whenever the special group detects people who ignore the rules of praying according to the Hanafi or Ismaili school and disturb the prayers of mosque members, they can, in cooperation with the law-enforcement organs, stop those individuals or pass the information about them to the organs."

It reported the Ministry as identifying the extremist movements as the Muslim movements of Salafi, Tabligh Jamaat, Ansorulloh, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir and others (not specified). The Salafi school of thought and Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement have been banned, even though no crimes have been connected with them.

The Ministry noted that round table participants included SCRA Head Sulaymon Davlatzoda, Chief Mufti Saidmukorrom Abdukodirzoda, Professor Abdurakhim Karimov of the Islamic Institute, and state-backed Muslim leaders Mirzo Ibronov, Makhmadullo Sharifzoda and Haji Ismoil Pirmuhammadzoda.

Interior Ministry, SCRA refuse comment on young activists

Interior Ministry Press Secretary Sadridin Jaloliddinov refused to say why the Ministry arranged the round table, and why the authorities planned to use young people to catch alleged extremists in the mosques. "Please talk to those higher in command in the Ministry," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 April.

The Interior Ministry duty official (who did not give his name) referred Forum 18 on 21 April to Minister Rahimzoda's office.

The official who answered the phone at the Minister's office the same day, who gave his name only as Karim and refused to give his last name, refused to say why the Police use young people to catch so-called extremists or why cameras and metal detectors are being installed in Dushanbe's mosques. "These are the kind of questions which cannot be discussed over the phone," he responded. "Please send us a letter."

Asked what the new group of activists mentioned at the round table of the Interior Ministry is, and what their duties will be, Davlatzoda of the SCRA similarly did not answer. He also did not say what will happen to those Muslims caught by the activists and detained by the Police who are not extremists, but pray in a manner which is not Hanafi or Ismaili. "Please, send those questions in writing," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 April.

Who are young activists, how they will be selected?

Olimov of the Sharq Research Centre said that Tajikistan had some experience during the Soviet times when people cooperated with the law-enforcement agencies. "But I don't know exactly they will select these young people," he told Forum 18.

"I understand that the authorities with the help of the cameras and the volunteers want to catch those who pray differently or who propagate their own teachings of Islam in the Mosques," Olimov added. "But using young people to catch extremists is not the right approach. How can these young people know or decide who is an extremist?"

Gulov told Forum 18 that it "may be not only young but also older people" that the authorities will use. "And it seems like a continuation of the system during Soviet times when people spied for the government for money, for future career or under pressure."

Metal detectors and cameras "to identify potential extremists"

The authorities "plan to install metal detectors and surveillance cameras in more than 70 mosques in the capital Dushanbe over government fears of extremist attacks," a government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Agence France Press on 29 March. It reported that the "measure was to track the contingent praying at the mosque and identify among believers potential extremists". The official said that the "equipment will be installed at the expense of the mosques and their congregations".

Karimzoda, Chief of the Legal Department of Dushanbe City Administration, told Forum 18 on 26 April that "this is nothing new, and cameras began being installed in mosques three or four years ago." However, he insisted that "this is not for tracking people, but just generally for the security of mosque attendees". He did not answer why metal detectors are needed.

Who issued ban on state employees at Friday prayers and why?

In 2015 the central authorities banned state employees from attending prayers and sermons on Fridays, which traditionally are conducted between 12.00 noon and 13.20 during the lunch break. However, it is not clear whether this is an officially written or unpublished order as well as when exactly this ban was put in place.

Olimova of the Sharq Research Centre told Forum 18 that already in January 2015, at a conference at the Academy of Sciences in Dushanbe where religious issues were discussed, "official statements were made that state employees must not attend Friday prayers since they take place during official work hours".

Olimov added that "in recent months I have noticed that the number of state employees attending Friday prayers fell drastically. A few still attend, but they do so strictly during the lunch break."

Odinashoh Valizoda, Chief of the Presidential Administration's Section for Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals, on 5 May refused to answer who ordered state employees not to attend Friday prayers and why. "I will give you no comments," he said, and asked Forum 18 to send questions in writing through the Foreign Ministry.

Asked who or which agency banned state employees from attending Friday prayers in mosques and why, Azizullo Mirzozoda, Deputy Head of the SCRA, declined to say. "I am not competent in those issues, and I cannot answer you." He referred Forum 18 to Jumokhon Giyosov, the SCRA's First Deputy Head. However, Giyosov's phones went unanswered on 5 May.

Nazrullo Muhammadyusuf, Chief Religious Affairs Official of Dushanbe City Administration, adamantly denied the ban. "There is no such ban," he told Forum 18 on 5 May. When Forum 18 insisted, asking him to declare that state employees are therefore allowed to attend Friday prayers freely, he responded: "I cannot say that."

Asked which state agency had issued the ban or order that state employees must not attend Friday prayers, Muhammadyusuf did not answer.

"Inciting religious hatred" charges for at least 6 imams and man who filmed police harassment

Forum 18 (26.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1TAwuMm> - Sulaymon Boltuyev, Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Guliston (former Kayrakkum), "did not call for forceful changes of the constitutional order, did not incite religious hatred, nor did he commit anything illegal", his lawyer Faizinisso Vokhidova told Forum 18 News Service. Boltuyev is among at least six imams in Tajikistan's northern Sogd Region in pre-trial detention since early March. They face up to five years' imprisonment on criminal charges of "inciting religious hatred". Also under arrest on the same charge is Okil Sharipov. On a visit to his family from Russia, he had filmed police harassment of women for wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). Prosecutors in the cases refused to discuss them with Forum 18 and nor would an official from the office of the Interior Minister in Dushanbe. Sulaymon Davlatzoda, Chair of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA), confirmed to Forum 18 that the arrested six Imams in Sugd had been appointed with the SCRA's approval. But he too could not say why they had been arrested.

At least six imams in Tajikistan's northern Sogd Region have been held in pre-trial detention since early March accused of "inciting religious hostility", Forum 18 News Service has learned. They face up to five years' imprisonment if convicted. One of the arrested imams, Sulaymon Boltuyev, "did not call for forceful changes of the constitutional order, did not incite religious hatred, nor did he commit anything illegal", his lawyer Faizinisso Vokhidova told Forum 18.

Arrested in the same Region in late February on the same criminal charge was Okil

Sharipov. On a visit to his family from Russia, he had filmed police harassment of women for wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf).

Asked who Forum 18 could talk to about the arrests of the imams and the man who had filmed police detentions of women in hijabs, the duty official (who did not his name) at the Interior Ministry in the capital Dushanbe referred Forum 18 on 21 April to the office of Interior Minister Lieutenant General Ramazon Khamro Rahimzoda.

Asked why the imams and Sharipov were arrested, the official who answered the phone at the Minister's office the same day, who gave his name only as Karim and refused to give his last name, told Forum 18: "I cannot answer those questions." Asked why, he claimed: "I work for a technical office." When Forum 18 insisted and asked who Forum 18 could talk to about the arrests, he replied, "These are the kind of questions which cannot be discussed over the phone. Please send us a letter."

Ever-tightening controls

Controls on religious communities – especially mosques – have been steadily increasing in recent years.

The authorities continue to close down Muslim prayer rooms, while mosques are being forced to instal surveillance cameras. The authorities have also sent young people to mosques to ensure that Muslims pray only in accordance with Hanafi or Ismaili rituals.

The campaign to control the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief has also seen a campaign to pressure women not to wear the hijab or men to wear beards.

"The mass campaigns of catching women in hijabs and men with beards may be over," Saodat Olimova of Sharq (Orient) Research Centre on religious issues told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 26 April. "But we continue to hear of individual incidents. The authorities are intent on liquidating all outward expression of religiosity."

Six arrested imams

The six Imam-hatyps of cathedral Mosques in the northern Sogd Region were all arrested in early March on the initiative of the Regional Prosecutor's Office. The Imams are being held at a Detention Centre in Sogd. All six had been appointed to their posts with the approval of the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA).

Boltuyev was Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Guliston (former Kayrakkum), Maksud Urunov Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Kanibadam, and Abdujamil Yusupov of the cathedral Mosque in Bobojon Gofurov District. Of the three other unnamed Imams, two are from Khujand and one from Kanibadam.

All six Imams are accused of inciting religious hatred under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 (inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred), Boltuyev's lawyer Vokhidova told Forum 18 on 21 April. The Imams are under threat of being punished with up to five years' imprisonment, she added.

Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 punishes "Actions leading to inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the exclusiveness of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using means of mass media". Punishments are up to five years' restricted freedom or imprisonment.

Imam Boltuyev "denies that he was involved in anything extremist", Vokhidova stressed. In his statement to the Prosecutor's officials he said that – contrary to the authorities'

accusations - he "did not call for forceful changes of the constitutional order, did not incite religious hatred, nor did he commit anything illegal". Boltuyev stated that the "nature of his calls to the Muslims for prayer and how to be believers was only peaceful."

Even more arrests?

Unconfirmed media reports speak of more arrested Imams in Kanibadam, Guliston and Bobojon Gofurov District of Sogd Region, as well as in the south-western Khatlon Region. Also reported arrested were between 100 and 200 graduates of universities and madrassahs in Uzbekistan, Pakistan or Arab countries. In Sogd Region, most of those arrested reportedly are from Kanibadam, Isfara, Bobojon Gofurov and Khujand.

However, the authorities have so far admitted only the arrest of the six Imams. Forum 18 could not independently verify the reports of the additional arrests.

Why the arrests?

Lawyer Vokhidova told Forum 18 that she does not know much about the investigation into the six arrested imams since she is "not familiar with the case files". However, she knows they are "suspected for being members of the [Egypt-based] Muslim Brotherhood movement."

Tajikistan's Supreme Court banned the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the country in 2006. However, the authorities have made no public statements explaining why the organisation was banned or who exactly in Tajikistan are members of the movement.

Vokhidova told Forum 18 that the Imams graduated from the Central Asian Islamic University in the Uzbek city of Tashkent and the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia. She said that Imam Boltuyev stated to the prosecution that he "only propagated Islam, prayed in accordance with the Hanafi Muslim school tradition," and that "his only intention was that the number of Muslim believers in the country would grow".

SCRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda confirmed to Forum 18 that the arrested six Imams in Sogd were appointed with the SCRA's approval. But he could not say why they had been arrested. "I do not know, an investigation is going on at the moment," he told Forum 18 on 21 April from Dushanbe. "Probably in one month the investigation will be completed, and we will find out why."

Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office refused to explain why the imams had been arrested. The Assistant (who did not give her name) of Regional Prosecutor Khabibullo Vokhidov on 21 April told Forum 18 that he is "not available". She referred it to Izzatullo Mukhamadi, the Deputy Prosecutor. The same day Mukhamadi took down Forum 18's question why the Imams were arrested but did not answer. "I cannot hear you well," he claimed while Forum 18's end of the line was clear. When Forum 18 repeated the question, he put the phone down. Subsequent calls the same day to the Prosecutor's and Deputy Prosecutor's phones went unanswered.

Religious affairs official dismissed, new Imam-hatyps chosen

Following the arrests, the chief religious affairs official of Bobojon Gofurov District was dismissed, local media reported on 5 April. Also in place of the arrested Imams, names of new Imams were presented to the SCRA.

Filming police harassment of women in hijabs = inciting religious hatred?

Okil Sharipov was arrested in the same Sogd Region's city of Isfara for filming Police harassment in mid-February of a group of women who wore hijabs. A female Police

officer forced the women onto a bus and took them to a Police Station. The film later appeared on YouTube and other websites.

Sharipov, who has lived in Russia for the last fifteen years and has Tajik and Russian citizenship, was arrested while on a visit to his parents in Isfara. "By chance he saw the Police stopping the women and was shocked, which is why he filmed what was happening," Vokhidova, his lawyer, told Forum 18 on 13 April.

Sharipov was arrested on 20 February for "not obeying the lawful demands of a Police officer". That same day Isfara City Court gave him seven days' administrative arrest under Administrative Code Article 479, Part 1, Vokhidova said. "It was just an excuse for the Police to put him under arrest so they could begin a criminal process," she complained. "How could he not obey the Police? It was he who went to the Police Station when he was invited."

On 27 February, the very day the administrative arrest was completed, Isfara Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case against Sharipov under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 for "inciting religious hostility". Isfara Court handed down to him two months' pre-trial detention.

Isfara Prosecutor Office's Investigator Muminjon Khalifazoda is leading the case. "Though the pre-trial detention period expires on 27 April, I think the authorities will prolong the arrest," Vokhidova said, "since these are serious charges."

Why was Sharipov arrested?

Vokhidova pointed out that Sharipov had not put the film on the internet. "He had only shared it with some acquaintances in Russia, who might have put it on the internet." She said that Sharipov's conditions in Police Detention Centre No. 2 in Khudjand are "normal", and he is "not complaining". The only complaint is "that we do not agree with the charges and that filming the women on the street was not a violation or a crime." Sharipov is "simply shocked that in the modern age women were harassed for wearing hijab".

Prosecutor's Office Investigator Khalifazoda refused to talk to Forum 18. He introduced himself on 14 April, but when asked why Sharipov was arrested and why the Police rounded up the women in hijabs on the street in Isfara, which Sharipov filmed, he claimed that "I cannot hear you well," though Forum 18's end of the line was clear. He then put the phone down. Forum 18 could not reach him again on the same day since he switched off the phone. Calls to his phone between 14 and 25 April went unanswered.

Prosecutor Anvar Khol Rakhmonzoda of Isfara on 14 April also refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Asked on what grounds Sharipov was arrested, he merely responded: "I can only tell you that we are investigating the case." Asked what happened to the women in hijabs who were forced onto the bus, and if the Prosecutor's Office is also investigating the Police actions, Rakhmonzoda said, "No." Asked why he would not answer, he put the phone down.

Women in hijabs rounded up on street and taken to Police station

Sharipov's filming of the women's detention in Isfara came as the Police were in the middle of a three- or four-day campaign in mid-February of "hunting for hijabs", independent news agency Tajinfo noted on 20 February, citing its sources.

Interior Minister Rahimzoda claimed to a press-conference in Dushanbe on 25 January that "Police do not detain or round up women in hijabs and men wearing beards, but only conduct explanatory work with them".

However, the "reality on the street is different," Tajinfo noted.

As seen in the footage filmed by Sharipov, a female Police officer stopped young and older women in hijabs on a busy Isfara street near a market, and made them get onto the Police bus.

Witnesses in Sharipov's video say that the Police intended to take the women to the Police Station to take their fingerprints. A woman sitting in the Police bus told Sharipov that her "only guilt was that I wear hijab".

Lawyer Vokhidova told Forum 18 that neither she nor Sharipov know who the women were, where the Police took them or what happened to them afterwards.

Women warned not to wear hijab and their children warned of expulsion from school

Tajinfo reporters, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 14 April that "women in hijabs, who are stopped by the Police on the street are taken to Police Stations and given preventive lectures so that they take off their hijabs and not wear it in future."

Some victims who contacted Tajinfo in the past told the agency that even their children in some schools are "threatened that they will be expelled from the school unless their mothers stop wearing hijabs", Tajinfo reporters added. They declined to give names or contacts of the victims for fear of state reprisals.

Chief of Isfara Police, Farkhod Atajonov, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 20 April and 25 April. Asked why Isfara Police detained women in hijabs on the street and what further measures the Police took, he put the phone down. Called back again on 25 April he asked Forum 18: "Why do you keep calling me? Don't call me again." He then put the phone down.

"Every organisation has a dress-code and people are asked to respect it"

Sadriddin Jaloliddinov, Press-Secretary of the Interior Ministry, denied that police had harassed women for wearing hijab or men for wearing beards. "Nothing like this ever happened in Tajikistan," he claimed to Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 April.

Told that Forum 18 has seen the video footage of the Police rounding up women in Isfara, Jaloliddinov brushed off Forum 18. "Anyone can compile such false materials and place them on the internet. Who can prove that they were indeed Police officers?" When Forum 18 told him it has in the past talked to victims of Police harassment for wearing hijabs and beards, he responded: "I don't know, you need to talk to our leadership about this."

Davlatzoda of the SCRA denied to Forum 18 that women in hijabs were detained in Sogd Region. "That fact did not find its confirmation," he insisted. Told that this and other facts of Police detention and harassment of women in hijabs and men with beards were documented by the media, and that Forum 18 talked to the victims in the past, he replied: "No law in Tajikistan bans the hijab or beards, but every organisation has a dress-code, and people are asked to respect it."

Asked why individuals cannot wear clothes of their choice in line with their religious beliefs, and what exactly is the dress code he mentioned, as well as what will happen to those who do not respect the dress code, Davlatzoda asked Forum 18 to send the questions in writing.

Tajikistan to install security cameras, metal detectors in mosques

RFE/RL (29.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ROEBrm> - Tajik authorities will install security cameras and metal detectors in all mosques in the capital, Dushanbe, the office of the city mayor said on March 29.

It said the measure is aimed at providing security for the worshippers and helping to strengthen public order.

The office of the mayor said the equipment will be installed at the expense of the mosques and their worshippers.

The AFP news agency quoted a government source as saying on condition of anonymity the measure was meant to "track the contingent praying at the mosque, to identify among believers potential followers of Salafism," referring to an ultra-conservative brand of Sunni Islam.

The staunchly secular government of President Emomali Rahmon tightly controls the country's religious institutions, including the appointment of mosque imams.

The country's Religious Affairs Committee even provides a list of topics it deems suitable for mosque sermons.

Mass arrest of imams trained abroad likely to backfire

By Paul Goble

Window on Eurasia (24.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1Sxu3at> - The Tajik militia have arrested approximately 20 imams in the northern portion of Tajikistan for administrative violations and detained them for 15 days; but their lawyers expect that the authorities will fabricate cases of extremism against them during that time and bring more serious charges against them.

Up to now, the official Tajik media have not reported on these arrests. They have been the subject of a report only by the independent Payom news agency (<http://bit.ly/1UFh7FD>) whose coverage has been summarized by the Russian-language Ansar portal (<http://bit.ly/1qmGCiD>).

Most of those arrested, the Payom agency says, have condemned the Islamist opposition in Tajikistan and have urged their parishioners not to take part in politics; but the 20 share one thing in common: all of them received their theological educations abroad, mostly in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

That makes them suspect in the eyes of Dushanbe which has been carrying out the most thorough-going effort of any post-Soviet state to identify and exclude graduates of foreign medrassahs and Islamic universities. (On this campaign and its limitations, see <http://bit.ly/23cKsbR>).

This wave of arrests reflects Dushanbe's nervousness about the spread of Islamist values from Afghanistan into Tajikistan, but there are three reasons to think that instead of

restricting the influence of Islamist radicalism there, this action will have exactly the opposite effect and allow the radicals to gain ground:

- First, the imams who have been arrested are likely to be replaced by far less qualified people who will be far less able to oppose the appeals of Islamists coming into Tajikistan from abroad.
- Second, many Tajiks are likely to see this wave of arrests as evidence of the anti-Islamic nature of the Tajik state and thus be more willing to listen to the radicals.
- And third, Dushanbe's assumption that it can control Muslims by controlling the mosques is likely to be shown as unwarranted. Many Tajiks will now go to underground mosques that the state doesn't control and where the messages they will receive are far more radical than any these 20 have given.

Tajikistan removes headscarves from 1,700 women and shaves beards off 13,000 men to tackle jihadism

Police uncovered and closed down 162 shops and stalls selling hijabs. Authorities said they took '89 hijab-wearing prostitutes' into custody. Men with beards deemed too long and unkempt were 'brought to order.' Latest move in Tajikistan's efforts to curb 'foreign influences.'

Daily Mail (21.01.2016) - <http://dailym.ai/1UAYSAj> - Police in the central Asian state of Tajikistan have forcibly shaved nearly 13,000 men and 'convinced' 1,700 women to remove their headscarves in a bid to eradicate radical Islam in the country.

The crackdown, aimed at reducing 'foreign influences', is the latest in a series of moves by the authoritarian government to tackle extremism.

According to Radio Liberty, a central Asian focused blog, who sourced the official Tajik news agency, police 'brought to order' men whose beards were deemed 'too long and unkempt'.

The head of the Khatlon police, Bahrom Sharifzoda, showed the local media a 'before and after' picture of one man that had been shaved.

Police also said they had 'convinced' 1,700 women to remove their headscarves, arrested 89 hijab-wearing prostitutes and closed down 162 shops and stalls selling hijabs.

Last week, the parliament voted to ban Arabic or 'foreign-sounding names' after a rise in babies named Mohammad.

Tajikistan is facing a security threat as thousands of home grown militants aligned Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, have joined forces with the Islamic State on the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border.

There are also thought to be up to 2,000 jihadis from Tajikistan fighting with ISIS in Syria.

Tajikistan is a majority Muslim country, but has a secular government. In September, the country's only Islamic party was banned from the political system.

The country's president President Emomali Rahmon, has been in power since 1994 and his current term ends in 2020.

He has been promoting secular values in addition to cementing his power.

Religious freedom survey, January 2016

Forum 18 (07.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1nyazKE> - Tajikistan has a record of violating freedom of religion or belief and related human rights such as the freedoms of expression and association. Among violations documented by Forum 18 News Service are: a ban on all exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission; severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques; arbitrary official actions, including the arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses using police agent provocateurs; bans on the Jehovah's Witnesses and some Islamic and Protestant movements; the banning of Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the arrest as prisoners of conscience of its senior party figures; forcing imams in state-controlled mosques (the only sort permitted) to preach state-dictated sermons; forcible closure of all madrassahs (Islamic religious schools); a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief, apart from funerals, by people under the age of 18; and state censorship of and bans on some religious literature and websites.

The government's actions imply that it thinks that the real threat it faces is people exercising their human rights outside state control.

Tajikistan is the smallest country in Central Asia, and is very mountainous. It has the third largest population in Central Asia, with well over 8 million people, about 80 per cent of whom are ethnic Tajiks. Around 15 per cent of the population are ethnic Uzbeks (who like Tajiks are regarded as being of mainly Sunni Muslim background) with the remaining 5 per cent being made up of small percentages of Slavs (mainly Russians, many of Russian Orthodox or other Christian background), Jews and other groups. After gaining independence the country fought a civil war between 1992 and 1997. During this the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, was banned. The IRP fought against the government in the civil war, but was re-legalised afterwards before its 2015 re-banning. Clan and ethnic loyalties were the main factors in the civil war. Poverty is widespread and the economy is very weak, with corruption often being reported. Many people of working age have left the country to seek employment elsewhere, mainly in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Dictatorship, climate of fear

President Emomali Rahmon, a former Soviet Communist Party official, has been head of the government since 1992 and President since 1994. His rule has been marked by multiple human rights violations, little sign of the rule of law, and hostility to democracy including electoral fraud. Parliamentary lower house elections on 1 March 2015 were found by an Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission to feature violations including "multiple voting and ballot box stuffing. The disregard of counting procedures meant that an honest count could not be guaranteed". President Rahmon's People's Democratic Party (PDPT) has 51 out of the total of 63 deputies in the lower house of parliament, while the now-banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) has no deputies. The IRP was Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party and was thought by independent observers to have more support than the two deputies it had in the previous parliament indicates. Secular civil society organisations, even those not working on political or human rights issues, spoke to a human rights defender known to Forum 18 of a climate of fear before the elections.

Exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission illegal

In April 2009 a new Religion Law came into force, which made all exercise of freedom of religion or belief with others without state permission illegal. The Law broke the country's international human rights commitments. Its passage was marked by a lack of public consultation, parliamentary debate or explanations of the reasons for its introduction. Among the restrictions imposed by the Law are: a ban on religious activity without state permission and obstacles to gain state registration; restrictions on the number and type of permitted mosques; tight controls on religious education; and the imposition of censorship. The Law is described in detail in Forum 18's March 2011 religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1553.

As noted below, further "legal" restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief have also been introduced since the Religion Law's entry into force. Exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief without state permission is punishable with fines under Article 477 of the Code of Administrative Offences. The wording of many parts of the Religion Law – like other laws - is extremely unclear, and allows much room for arbitrary official actions.

Places of worship restricted, closed, bulldozed

Among restrictions on freedom of religion or belief are limitations on the numbers of mosques allowed per head of population, non-permitted mosques having been in the past demolished. Officials also impose an extra-legal ban on Islamic preaching in all but the largest mosques, designated as Central cathedral mosques. Other types of mosques allowed under the Religion Law are medium sized Cathedral mosques, and the smallest Five-fold mosques.

Even before the 2009 Religion Law was passed, the authorities closed down and demolished Muslim, Christian and Jewish places of worship, including the country's only synagogue which was bulldozed despite community protests. No compensation was paid for the demolitions. Very unusually, in March 2009 the Jewish community received a building that they can use as a synagogue. However, it was not the Dushanbe city authorities which provided the building, but Hasan Asadullozoda, President Rahmon's businessman brother-in-law.

After the Religion Law was passed, many mosques were forcibly closed and Muslims warned not to engage in meetings for worship. Officials from Dushanbe Mayor's office and the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) claimed to Forum 18 in January 2011 that the closed mosques "are not mosques", and "cannot be used as mosques". It is unclear why the authorities claim that mosques should apply for registration, when the authorities have decided in advance that they cannot be used for worship. A Dushanbe imam, who wished to remain unnamed for fear of the authorities, told Forum 18 in January 2011 that he welcomes members of a closed mosque to his mosque, but "they want to have their own mosque". Officials would not tell Forum 18 what measures will be taken against imams or local Muslims if they continue worshipping in closed mosques.

Arbitrary official actions, officials' impunity for human rights violations

Arbitrary official actions are routine; in 2007 Jehovah's Witnesses were banned, and as one put it to Forum 18 in 2010, they "live in uncertainty and fear, and cannot worship openly". For example, twice in July 2015, police in the northern Sogd Region detained Jehovah's Witnesses and prepared administrative punishments. Officers raided a meeting for prayer and Bible study in a flat, seizing Bibles, questioning those present at the police station and demanded that they renounce their faith. Khurshed Barotov, Deputy District Police Chief who questioned those detained, claimed to Forum 18 that "we have freedom of religion", but they were "teaching religion unlawfully in a private flat".

On 26 July 2015 police detained two female Jehovah's Witnesses - Gulnora Tegniyeva and Chaborkhon Bozorboyeva - at a meeting at a bus stop arranged with them by an apparent police agent provocateur. This person had previously repeatedly phoned the two Jehovah's Witnesses asking for a meeting to discuss their faith. When the two Jehovah's Witnesses arrived, police arrested them. Police refused to confirm or deny to Forum 18 whether the apparent agent provocateur works for them. The two Jehovah's Witnesses were "hit on the head and slapped" for refusing to sign a police report, though police denied this to Forum 18.

The United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Tajikistan acceded to on 11 January 1995, defines torture as: "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

Under Article 6 of the Convention, Tajikistan is obliged to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture. Under Article 4, Tajikistan is obliged to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature". No official responsible for torturing people exercising freedom of religion or belief appears to have been arrested.

Military comments in 2007 suggested that the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses might possibly be linked to this community's conscientious objection to compulsory military service – which is not permitted in Tajikistan. At the same time "temporary" bans were also imposed on two Dushanbe Protestant organisations, Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre. The authorities refused to put the ban on Ehyo in writing. Ehyo was allowed to resume its activity in late 2008, but Abundant Life decided in May 2008 to close permanently. "We were asked to change so many points in our charter that it made it impossible for us to function as we intended to," Shaukat Dusmatov complained. He explained that one of the Centre's major functions was printing and importing Christian religious literature. "Realising that the idea of being involved in literature was going to be impossible we decided to stop." (See also the Censorship section below.)

State control of belief communities, especially Islam

Perhaps because Islam is the majority faith, the Islamic community is singled out for special restrictions by a government that appears to wish to control everything. The state restricts the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by Muslims from both inside the Islamic community's structures (notably through the Council of Ulems or religious scholars) as well as outside its formal structures (for example through the Religion Law). In contrast, the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by non-Muslim individuals and communities is mainly restricted by controls outside these communities' formal structures, such as the Religion Law.

The main state agency for such restricting freedom of religion or belief is the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) under the Presidential Administration. The SCRA was re-created in May 2010 to take over roles previously undertaken by the Culture Ministry, which in November 2006 had taken over roles from the previous SCRA.

Tajikistan penalises people for their ideas, not their actions. On 8 December 2014 the Supreme Court ruled that Salafi Muslims are "extremist". The Court's then-Deputy Chair

Makhmudjon Ashurov replied "I cannot tell" when Forum 18 asked him what the difference between this and the 2009 ban on Salafis is. He also refused to state how the authorities will identify a person as a Salafi Muslim. The SCRA's then-Deputy Head Mavlon Mukhtarov claimed 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".

Many Muslims associated with the similarly banned Tabligh Jamaat Islamic missionary movement were in 2010 given long prison sentences and huge fines. One of the Muslims complained to Forum 18 that he "does not understand why we should be prosecuted for peacefully praying in mosques and propagating Islam".

Tabligh Jamaat was among 10 organisations banned by the Supreme Court in 2006, but the bans were not made public until early 2007. An official of the Supreme Court Chancellery (who would not give his name) told Forum 18 in May 2009 that he knew nothing about a ban on Tabligh Jamaat. He referred Forum 18 to Solehjon Zavkiyev, at that time Deputy Chief of the Supreme Court Apparatus. Zavkiyev also said he knew nothing about the ban and referred Forum 18 to Farrukh Malakhov, the Supreme Court's Press Officer.

An independent human rights defender who is familiar with Tabligh Jamaat followers in Tajikistan described it to Forum 18 in May 2009 as peaceful and said "they tell Muslims how to recognise dangerous Islamic movements (..) This is exactly what Tajikistan needs." A Tabligh Jamaat follower questioned why, if the authorities think the group is harmful, its followers were able to preach openly until April 2009.

Even the authorities have not provably linked any crimes committed because of their beliefs to followers of any of the banned beliefs - the Salafi school of thought, Tabligh Jamaat, Jehovah's Witnesses, or some Protestants. Saifullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18 in May 2010 that he thought the reason for the bans on the two Muslim movements was that they did not "exactly follow the Islam prescribed by the Council of Ulems, which is under the President".

During Friday prayers on 3 July 2015 in the central Khodji Yokub Mosque in Dushanbe, Police Colonel Barotali Khamidzoda, who represents the Interior Ministry's Special Forces controlling "religious extremism" cases, warned attendees that "anyone leaving Tajikistan's mosques before Friday prayers are fully read will be punished". He did not specify what the punishments would be. Colonel Khamidzoda warned that the law-enforcement agencies "will ensure order and discipline during the namaz [Muslim prayer] in all the country's mosques and will spare no effort for the sake of peace and security of believers during prayers". He told Forum 18 that "sometimes Salafis or people from other Muslim movements banned in Tajikistan may attend a mosque and leave in the middle of the prayers, and we would like to identify those". Asked why all Muslims are being forced to accept the Hanafi school of Islam, Colonel Khamidzoda did not answer.

Rustom Gulov, a human rights defender from Khujand, described Colonel Khamidzoda's statements and warnings as an "example of direct state interference in the private matters of faith of its citizens". Some Muslims do not remain in the mosques until all the prayers are read, Gulov explained to Forum 18. They think that they need stay only until the main part of the prayer is done and then do the rest at home privately. "Who can guarantee that the police will not begin catching innocent people who leave prayers early because they have to leave urgently for important reasons, or think they may do the rest at home?"

In October 2015 the SCRA stated that government employees were prohibited from attending early afternoon Friday prayers, Asia-Plus news agency reported on 12 October. It remains unclear how widespread or enforced the ban is. Human rights defender Gulov

and independent legal expert Faredun Hodizoda both confirmed to Forum 18 on 7 January 2016 that it affects at least some officials. Separately, a private-sector business source, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 on 7 January that some state officials they know were told not to attend mosques, though some still attend mosques.

Central Asia's only religious-based political party banned, state-dictated sermons

Just before the 2015 election, on 27 February, a sermon apparently prepared by the SCRA was read – or at least partly read - during Friday prayers in central mosques nationwide. The text attacked the opposition IRP, praised President Rahmon and his PDPT, and called on Muslims to vote only for candidates from Rahmon's Party. After the elections, another SCRA written sermon called for the IRP to be closed down and for there to be only one party in the country. The SCRA's then-Deputy Head Solehjon Zavkiyev (who previously worked for the Supreme Court), who was then responsible for mosques, denied to Forum 18 that imams were required to read the two state-produced sermons at Friday prayers. Orders to imams to read out such sermons are "not compulsory but only a recommendation", he claimed.

After the election, on 27 March 2015, also during Friday prayers, another pre-written SCRA sermon was read in mosques across the country. The text Forum 18 has seen claimed the 1 March elections showed overwhelming support for Rahmon's party, attacked the IRP as a threat to society, and encouraged Muslims to call on the central government to initiate a referendum to close the IRP down. The text states "let there be only one effective party in Tajikistan". Unlike the 27 February sermon, which was unsigned, the 27 March sermon was signed by Abdurahmon Mavlanov, who is thought to work for the SCRA.

"Many central mosques across Tajikistan just read the preamble of the letter, where the name of our Party is not given explicitly," Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda of the IRP told Forum 18. But, he continued, "several central mosques in [the capital] Dushanbe and in Sogd Region, including two mosques in Khujand, read the whole letter". Government officials in the municipal administrations of Khujand and Istaravshan District in Sogd Region refused to comment to Forum 18 on either of the pre-written sermon texts.

The Justice Ministry banned the IRP on 28 August 2015 and gave the party 10 days to halt all activities. The deadline was 7 September. Following the ban, more than 10 senior party figures were arrested, including spokesperson Sayfullozoda. They are currently jailed as prisoners of conscience for their political opposition to the government.

All preaching in mosques – not only preaching at election times - is state controlled. For example the SCRA instructed imams across Tajikistan through the state-backed Council of Ulems in February 2014 to preach against LGBTI people and "non-traditional sexual relations". Asked why imams cannot themselves decide what they should preach on, and why the SCRA issued an instruction to all imams on what to preach, The SCRA's then-Deputy Head Zavkiyev denied to Forum 18 that the instruction came from the SCRA. "It was a decision of the Council of Ulems," he claimed, "and I don't see anything wrong in it." He became noticeably upset when Forum 18 asked why the topic of homosexuality was chosen for a centralised preaching instruction, instead of another topic. He refused to answer the question and put the phone down.

Ban on hijabs and beards

President Rahmon on 6 March 2015 condemned women wearing "uncharacteristic" dress and 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. However, the SCRA's then-Deputy Head Zavkiyev claimed to Forum 18 that "no one ever banned the hijab or spoke against it".

About the same time, police began forcibly shaving bearded Muslim men throughout the country, local people told Forum 18. "Aren't such actions and bans something that those interested in promoting jihad will use to provoke a reaction?" independent legal expert Hodizoda noted. Deputy Interior Minister Ikrom Umarzoda refused to tell Forum 18 who ordered the beard-shaving campaign. Officials have contradicted themselves on whether police will be held responsible. One victim of the beard-shaving, human rights defender and blogger Rustom Gulov, publicly complained to the President and other senior officials about the campaign's lack of legal basis and the need to punish perpetrators. Gulov stated that the official response "will be an indicator of the value of human dignity in Tajikistan". The only formal response was for him to be questioned about an allegedly "negative comment insulting President Rahmon" left on his blog. Officials demanded this be removed, which was done.

Hostility to international contacts

Article 474-4 of the Administrative Code, which came into force in July 2012, punishes religious organisations which make or maintain international contacts without state permission with fines of up to 100 Financial Units (according to the 2016 state budget, each Financial Unit is 40 Somonis). Article 478 of the Code already punished foreign citizens or organisations for conducting religious activity without Tajik government approval.

On 13 April 2015 the SCRA imposed more restrictions on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca, banning under-35s from participating. From 2009 officials imposed a ban on people younger than 16 and older than 80 taking part. The SCRA claims that the under-35s ban is due to renovation works at Mecca, but Saudi Arabia's Embassy in Dushanbe would not confirm this to Forum 18.

The SCRA has also barred the international contacts of other communities. From early 2015 the SCRA consistently rejected requests by a variety of non-Muslim registered religious communities to be allowed to invite fellow-believers from abroad to participate in religious events. The Orthodox Church was refused permission to invite two scholars from Uzbekistan to a July 2015 conference. Other religious communities asked Forum 18 not to name them for fear of state reprisals or to identify their would-be foreign guests. Officials have refused to explain the reasons for the ban, which appears to be part of a government desire to reduce religious communities' foreign contacts.

Freedom of religion or belief of children and parents severely restricted

The state also imposes control of Muslims exercising freedom of religion or belief in other ways. Only one madrassah (Islamic religious school) was allowed to operate until June 2016, all the others having been from July 2013 forcibly closed after a speech by President Rahmon claiming without giving evidence that some of their ex-pupils had become "terrorists". In June 2015 the state-controlled Islamic University, under which the madrassah operated, announced that the madrassah was "temporarily suspended" and claimed that its buildings cannot accommodate all the pupils. The madrassah is still closed, human rights defender Gulov told Forum 18 on 7 January 2016.

Mavlon Mukhtarov of the SCRA, as well as Abdukhakim Sharipov of Sogd Region's Religious Affairs Department claimed to Forum 18 in December 2013 that the suspensions came because the authorities wanted to "bring order" to the madrassahs' legal documents and curricula. Mukhtarov said he "cannot give an exact time" for their reopening. Article 474-3 of the Administrative Code, introduced in July 2012, punishes

religious teaching in homes or educational institutions. The UN Human Rights Committee criticised the state's restrictions on religious education – and other "severe restrictions on freedom of religion" – in a report published in August 2013 (reference CCPR/C/TJK/CO/2).

Officials have continued to stop children receiving Islamic religious education. For example, in December 2014 police in Vahdat arrested and took into custody two Muslim men after raids. Criminal cases were opened against them for teaching school-aged children the Koran and Islam. The families were afraid to give details of the raids and arrests.

Related to this, the 2011 Parental Responsibility Law is hostile to freedom of religion or belief and related rights such as the rights of the child and the freedoms of expression and association. This Law bans jewellery and tattoos, limits the names parents can choose for their children, bans "the encouragement of children to receive education in illegal schools and education institutions as well as from individual persons who do not have permission for such activity", requires parents "not to allow the education of adolescent children abroad without the permission of appropriate state agencies" and bans the participation of children and young people below the age of 18 in religious events apart from funerals.

Officials continue to implement the Parental Responsibility Law. For example, the SCRA wrote to various Protestant churches in December 2014 warning them not to allow children to be at meetings for worship. But threats to suspend the churches' activity have yet to be carried out. The Supreme Court's then-Deputy Chair Ashurov did not answer when asked what Tajikistan intends to do to remove the contradiction between its international human rights obligations and the Religion and Parental Responsibility Laws.

Censorship

As noted above, a particular target for a variety of restrictions by the authorities has been the now-banned Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). In 2013 police in the northern city of Khujand seized "hundreds of booklets" from IRP members, a party member told Forum 18. The booklets, seized ahead of the 15 October Islamic festival of Kurban Bayram (Eid al-Adha), explained "the meaning of the holiday and its values". Police warned party members they could be punished for distributing unapproved religious literature.

Officials apply such censorship to all texts by people of all beliefs. A Baptist was fined in Dushanbe in September 2013 after three church members received religious magazines by post from Belarus. The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police brought this case – and all of at least five other earlier cases. Mavlon Mukhtarov, then Deputy Head of the SCRA, told Forum 18 that censorship "must be done according to the Religion Law".

The "offence" of producing, distributing, importing or exporting religious literature and items of a religious nature which have not passed through the compulsory prior state religious censorship is punishable under Article 474-1 of the Administrative Code, which came into force in January 2011. 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".

In August 2015 the State Communications Agency – the government agency that censors the internet – ordered mobile phone operator Tcell to block several websites "for an unspecified period of time", TeliaSonera – the Swedish-Finnish telecom company which owns Tcell – noted on its website. Other internet companies were given similar orders. One of the sites blocked was turajon.org, a site run on behalf of three prominent brothers who are Islamic scholars. The site is hosted in California.

The three brothers - Nuriddinjon, Haji Akbar and Mahmudjon – are sons of a prominent Sufi sheikh Mahamaddrafi Turajon, who died in 2005. Nuriddinjon was an imam of a mosque in Vahdat, west of Dushanbe, which attracted thousands of worshippers to his sermons, some of which have been posted to the website. Over 50 officials from the police, NSC secret police, Prosecutor's Office and the SCRA raided the Vahdat mosque (where two of the Turajonzoda brothers preached) during Friday prayers in December 2011. They accused the mosque leaders of marking a Shia Muslim commemoration, insisting that only Hanafi Sunni rituals should be observed. The two brothers were fined, while nine other mosque members were held for 10 days with no court hearing. The SCRA also removed the two brothers as the mosque's imams and downgraded its status.

Haji Akbar, Chief Mufti in the early 1990s, was prominent with the IRP during the civil war (1992-7), but abandoned the party in 1997 and left the upper chamber of parliament in 2010. He remains active in business and often comments on religious affairs. Mahmudjon is a Muslim scholar.

The website turajon.org hosts a question and answer section where readers of the site can post questions on religious points to the brothers. As women have been barred from attending mosques by the Council of Ulems since 2004, this is one of the few places where they can seek religious rulings directly from male Muslim leaders, two academics Shahnoza Nozimova and Tim Epkenhans observed in a 2013 article. Two of the three brothers publicly opposed the 2004 ban on women in mosques.

The other sites the State Communications Agency ordered blocked in August 2015 were Facebook and YouTube (both of which the Agency regularly orders blocked), as well as nahzat.tj, the website of the opposition IRP, which was banned days later.

Officials deny reality

As noted above the authorities often deny that they have violated the right to freedom of religion or belief, frequently invoking spurious justifications for their actions. For example, Forum 18 asked Abdulkhakim Sharipov, the north-western Sogd Region's senior religious affairs official, on 26 February 2014 whether he thought state control of Islam is being increased. He replied: "Do you think western countries would allow just anybody to open any kind of religious organisation and teach anything they want?" Sharipov explained that by "western countries", he meant any country in Western Europe or North America. Forum 18 informed him that in such countries - unless something like tax exemption or state financial assistance is sought - anyone is free to form a religious organisation to teach and practice their beliefs without any kind of state registration or permission. Sharipov then claimed that "we are not totally controlling exercise of freedom of religion or belief, but we want some order in it".

To control everything with only the pretence of the rule of law

As Forum 18 noted before Tajikistan's last October 2011 UPR, despite the experience of civil war between 1992 and 1997, Tajikistan shows little sign of understanding that genuine security depends on genuine respect for human rights, despite the explicit link made in OSCE commitments and other international human rights obligations the authorities have freely undertaken. Indeed, the authorities behave as if the real threat they face is people exercising their human rights outside the control of President Rahmon and government officials. The authorities' actions appear to be motivated by a wish to control everything with only the pretence of the rule of law. There is no evidence that Tajikistan has any intention of implementing its solemn international and domestic commitments to respect freedom of religion or belief, or other fundamental human rights.
