

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Pensioner faces up to 10 years' imprisonment***
  - ***Detention extended, no Bible reading allowed***
  - ***Jehovah's Witness jailed for four months for reading banned Bible***
  - ***Tajikistan mulls reopening more than 590 mosques that had been closed down in previous years***
  - ***Jailed, awaiting trial on "incitement" charges***
  - ***Children barred from attending church***
  - ***Raid, torture, interrogations, fines, calendars destroyed***
- 

## **Pensioner faces up to 10 years' imprisonment**

***The criminal trial of 68-year-old Jehovah's Witness Shamil Khakimov in Khujand resumes on 20 August. He faces up to 10 years' imprisonment for "inciting religious hatred", charges he denies. Prosecutors claim materials confiscated from him and others contained "features of extremist activity". The investigation revealed a 2016 state "expert analysis" by three Imams claiming the distribution of a Tajik Bible translation causes "confrontation".***

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (07.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2PdvCVI> - The criminal trial of 68-year-old Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Shamil Khakimov is due to resume in the northern city of Khujand on 20 August. Khujand City Court held the first hearing on 5 August, but postponed the case to provide the defendant with an interpreter into Russian. Khakimov is facing charges of allegedly "inciting religious hatred", which carry a jail term of between five and ten years. But his real "crime" seems to be that the regime thinks he leads Khujand's Jehovah's Witness community.

Court officials refused to say how long they expect Khakimov's trial to last (see below).

Khakimov, a retired widower, is in poor health, Jehovah's Witnesses noted. He underwent major leg surgery not long before his arrest and suffers from high blood pressure. Despite this, he has been held in pre-trial detention for more than five months, since his 26 February arrest (see below).

Khakimov is being prosecuted for books, other literature, photos, videos, audios, computer files and mobile phone data seized from him and other community members. The Prosecutor's Office claims these materials contain "features of extremist activity", according to the indictment seen by Forum 18. Khakimov denies any wrongdoing (see below).

The investigation into Khakimov revealed that in 2016, the Department for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals of Sogd Regional Administration commissioned a "state religious expert analysis" of the Tajik translation of the Bible published by the Institute for Bible Translation (IBT) in Stockholm. (The IBT is not linked to Jehovah's Witnesses and its translations are used by a wide range of Christians.)

The analysis – conducted by three local Imams – was carried out at the request of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police (see below).

The imams and the Department for Religious Affairs concluded: "The book does not correspond to our society of Hanafi Muslims, its propaganda and distribution among the Muslim people does not meet the goals of our society, and its distribution among Hanafi Muslims causes confrontation and schism, and leads to misunderstandings."

Imam Ibodullo Kalonzoda – one of the three Khujand Imams the state brought in to conduct the analysis - put the phone down when Forum 18 tried to ask him about it (see below).

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 of their "considerable concern" that the investigator included in Khakimov's case file the "expert analysis", "which concludes that the Bible incites religious hatred and should not be permitted for use in Tajikistan."

Jehovah's Witnesses described it as "deeply troubling" that the Tajik authorities would consider the Bible to incite religious hatred. "That expert study confirms that Shamil Khakimov is being prosecuted for his peaceful minority religious views as one of Jehovah's Witnesses" (see below).

A Baptist in the capital Dushanbe told Forum 18 that the IBT Tajik translation was among Christian literature seized from church members in 2017. Although officials promised to return the literature they have not done so (see below).

The Culture Ministry banned Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the country in October 2007. The banning order stated: "The religious organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses carried out its activity in violation of Republic of Tajikistan legislation by distributing in public places and at the homes of citizens, i.e. among members and followers of other religions, propagandistic books on their religion, which has become a cause of discontent on the part of the people".

The Supreme Court banned the Tabligh Jamaat Muslim missionary movement (in an unpublished 2006 decision) and Salafi Islam (in 2009). Two Protestant communities were "temporarily" banned in 2007.

Prisoner of conscience Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, who led a Protestant Church in Khujand, was jailed for three years in July 2017 under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'". He remains in prison.

### **Khakimov: Interrogations, literature and passport seizures**

Jehovah's Witness Shamil Rasulovich Khakimov (born 30 January 1951), a retired widower, began facing harassment in early 2019. On 28 January an officer of the Organised Crime Department, Nekruz Ibromkhimzoda, phoned him when he was at home and called him onto the street. However, no one was there.

The following day, the Organised Crime Department began summoning for questioning people Khakimov knows, both fellow Jehovah's Witnesses and others. Such interrogations continued until May, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

On 1 February, Organised Crime Department officials summoned Khakimov. There, Lieutenant Colonel Sukhrob Rustamzoda led questioning over eight hours about how he became a Jehovah's Witness and the structure of the organisation. Officials did not allow him to seek legal assistance during the interrogation, Jehovah's Witnesses complained. Nor did officials allow him to seek a required change in his dressing on his leg following surgery.

Officials then took Khakimov home, where they seized his computer, tablet computer, religious literature and passport. Without his passport he was unable to access his pension funds which he needed to pay for necessary medical treatment.

On 3 February Khakimov filed a complaint with the Regional Prosecutor's Office about his treatment from the Organised Crime Department. However, the Prosecutor's Office ignored the complaint as well as a second complaint.

Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office phones went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 7 August.

### **Khakimov: Arrest, "inciting religious hatred" charges**

Officials arrested Khakimov on 26 February. Khujand City Court approved his detention in pre-trial custody in Khujand's Investigation Prison for two months. Three successive court hearings extended the detention each time for a further month (at least once without his lawyer even being informed). Each time Khakimov challenged the City Court detention orders in the Regional Court, but without success.

Prisoner of conscience Khakimov is still being held in Khujand's Investigation Prison:

Ya/S 9/2 Investigation Prison  
Khujand  
Sogd Region

Against international human rights standards, prisoner of conscience Khakimov has not been allowed to read his Bible in prison.

Investigator Nosirkhuja Dodokhonzoda of Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office led the investigation. He commissioned a literary-political and psycho-linguistic "expert analysis" of books, other publications, photos, audio and video recordings and other information from the mobile phones and computers not only of Khakimov but other community members.

The "expert analysis", completed on 10 April, claimed that these materials "contained mass appeals and ideas, aimed at inciting religious, national and racial discord and at advocating superiority of citizens on the basis of religion, demeaning national honour and dignity, and advocacy of improvement for citizens due to their belonging to the religion and party". It claimed this contained "features of extremist activity".

The "expert analysis" based its conclusion on quotations from some of the seized materials, such as "The Kingdom will destroy the governments of this world", "What is God's Kingdom? The Kingdom of God is a heavenly government. It will replace all other governments, and will cause God's will to be done in heaven and on earth...", "Jehovah will change the world through the Kingdom of the Messiah", and "No government has ever succeeded in eliminating violence, disease, or death. But there is good news. Shortly, God will replace all human governments with his own government. Its subjects will enjoy peace and good health".

Another part of the case relates to Khakimov's possession of a Tajik translation of the Bible published by the Institute for Bible Translation (IBT) in Stockholm. An "expert analysis" by three Imams – commissioned by the regional Department for Religious Affairs at the request of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police in 2016 concluded that distribution of the translation in Tajikistan would cause conflict (see below).

Investigator Dodokhonzoda accused Khakimov of violating Criminal Code Article 189, Part 2, Point d ("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", when committed by a group). This carries a punishment of five to 10 years' imprisonment, with a possible additional ban on specified activity.

The indictment makes no claim and gives no evidence that Khakimov violated or called for the violation of others' human rights.

On 4 July, Investigator Dodokhonzoda completed his indictment, of which Forum 18 has seen the text. Khakimov rejected the charges and refused to sign the documents.

### **Khakimov: Jehovah's Witness pensioner on trial**

The criminal trial of Khakimov under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 2, Point d began under Judge Nargis Nabizoda at Khujand City Court on 5 August, an official of the Court chancellery told Forum 18 on 6 August. The trial was adjourned until 20 August so that an interpreter from Tajik into Russian for Khakimov could be provided.

The official (who did not give her name) refused to give any other details of the trial, or say how long it is likely to last. "It will go on for some time," was all she would say. She also refused to put Forum 18 through to the Chief of the Chancellery or any other officials.

Asked about the case, the Chair of the Court Mavjuda Sharifzoda's Secretary (who did not give her name) said the Chair is on holiday. She refused to put Forum 18 through to any other officials of the Court.

### **Tajik Bible translation distribution "causes confrontation"**

The investigation into Khakimov revealed that in 2016, the Department for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals of Sogd Regional Administration commissioned a "state religious expert analysis" of the Tajik translation of the Bible published by the Institute for Bible Translation (IBT) in Stockholm.

The IBT, now based in Moscow, is a non-profit organisation to translate and distribute Bibles in the non-Slavic languages of the region and functions with the blessing of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill.

The "expert analysis" was conducted at the request of the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police of Sogd Region.

The Sogd Department for Religious Affairs assigned the "expert analysis" to three local imams, Haji Husayn Musozoda and Orifjon Bayzoyev (of Khujand's Sheikh Muslikhiddin central mosque) and Ibodullo Kalonzoda (of the city's Nuri Islom Mosque).

In the two-page decision dated 19 December 2016 (and seen by Forum 18), the imams and the Department for Religious Affairs recognise that the Bible is the main book for Christianity and that this Tajik translation had been approved in an "expert analysis" for the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) in Dushanbe on 13 March 2012.

However, the Imams and the Sogd Department for Religious Affairs conclude: "The book does not correspond to our society of Hanafi Muslims, its propaganda and distribution among the Muslim people does not meet the goals of our society, and its distribution among Hanafi Muslims causes confrontation and schism, and leads to misunderstandings."

The Imams gave no evidence that anyone had violated anyone else's human rights as a direct result of reading the IBT Tajik translation of the Bible.

The decision does not reveal where the NSC secret police or the Department for Religious Affairs in Sogd Region acquired the copy of the Tajik Bible translation which the imams examined.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 of their "considerable concern" that the investigator included in Khakimov's case file the "expert analysis", "which concludes that the Bible incites religious hatred and should not be permitted for use in Tajikistan."

Jehovah's Witnesses described it as "deeply troubling" that the Tajik authorities would consider the Bible to incite religious hatred. "That expert study confirms that Shamil Khakimov is being prosecuted for his peaceful minority religious views as one of Jehovah's Witnesses."

A Protestant pastor, who asked not to be named for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that "our Church in Dushanbe has not experienced such a problem so far with Tajik Bibles, and I have not heard of other Protestant Churches which faced such a problem."

However, the pastor was concerned both about the examination of the Bible and who it was assigned to. "Why should Imams give expert analysis of the Bibles? Even in Russia the authorities have decided not to question the books of the well-known world religions, such as the Koran and the Bible."

Bishop Pitirim (Konstantin Tvorogov) of the Russian Orthodox Synod of Dushanbe and Tajikistan told Forum 18 on 5 August that the Orthodox "Church or believers have no problems" to exercise their religious freedoms. "And our believers usually read the Bible in Russian."

"I know that Jehovah's Witnesses are banned in Tajikistan," the bishop added, "but it is strange that the experts would give such an opinion on the Christian Bible." He argued that "I do not think this will become a precedent or a law against the Bible, but the authorities are just using it in this case since the organisation is banned."

### **Imams "not competent to give their expert analysis of the Bible"**

Farrukhullo Olimzoda, Deputy Chair of the State Committee for Religious Affairs in Dushanbe, declined to talk to Forum 18 on 6 August and referred it to Khuseyn Shokirov, the chief official responsible for work with religious organisations and registration.

Shokirov confirmed that the Committee had approved the IBT translation of the Bible into Tajik in 2012. "The Imams are not competent to give their expert analysis of the Bible," he insisted to Forum 18 on 6 August. Asked why then the Khujand Imams did so, he responded: "You need to talk to them."

Told that one of the main reasons that Jehovah's Witness Khakimov is currently being criminally prosecuted is because of that "expert analysis", Shokirov repeated his previous answer.

When Forum 18 asked on 5 August about the "expert analysis", Imam Ibodullo Kalonzoda put the phone down. Called back later, his daughter (who did not give her name) answered Kalonzoda's mobile phone. Asked why Imam Kalonzoda gave an "expert analysis" of the Bible, she said she will ask the question to him "when he is available".

Called back on 6 August, the daughter answered the phone again. "He is on an official trip, and left his phone at home," she claimed. When Forum 18 told her that it was told by Khujand City religious affairs Department on 5 August that Imam Kalonzoda has retired, she could not answer. Then she declined to talk further.

The official (who refused to give his name) who answered the phone of Mukhsin Mirkamolov, Head of Khujand City Department for Religious Affairs, claimed to Forum 18 on 5 August that Mirkamolov is "busy and cannot answer your questions." Asked when Forum 18 can call back he muttered, "I don't know."

The official then asked Forum 18 why it is looking for Mirkamolov, and when Forum 18 asked why "Imam Kalonzoda and the other Imams made an expert opinion that the Tajik Bible cannot be given to Tajik Muslims since it can create confrontations and schism," he answered, "Comrade Forum 18, you can ask Imam Kalonzoda or Rakhmatzoda about it."

The official refused to give numbers for R. Rakhmatzoda, who chairs the Sogd Department for Religious Affairs' "Expert Analysis" Commission and signed the December 2016 Imams' analysis of the Tajik Bible.

Asked why Muslim clerics gave an "expert analysis" of a Christian Bible, the official replied, "Comrade Forum 18, you can ask the Sogd regional authorities."

Numbers of the Head of the Sogd Regional Administration as well as Sukhrob Rustamzoda, head of the Regional Religious Affairs Department, went unanswered on 5 August.

### **Bibles, religious books confiscated, not returned**

The IBT Tajik translation of the Bible is among religious literature the authorities have seized in recent years.

In summer 2017, State Committee for Religious Affairs officials "confiscated from us some 300 books, including Tajik Bibles in the IBT translation, claiming that we may have extremist literature", Andrei Chumachenko of the Council of Churches Baptists in Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 5 August.

The officials also questioned the Baptists on why they carry out activity without the required state registration. The authorities did "not open a case against us, and left us alone. We have had our services unimpeded so far," Chumachenko said. "However, they did not return our books, though we asked them soon after the confiscation. They told us verbally that they will return the books to us, but have not done so until now."

Shokirov of the State Committee in Dushanbe on 6 August refused to discuss with Forum 18 the 2017 confiscation of books from the Baptists.

In December 2018 customs officers at Dushanbe Airport confiscated 5,000 calendars with New Testament verses that Dushanbe's state-registered Baptist Church was importing. The calendars were later destroyed and a fine equivalent to about four months' average wage imposed. One Customs official said that "after linguistic experts in the Culture Ministry .. found elements of propaganda of an alien faith, the calendars were confiscated". Officials refused to explain why the state might regard some faiths as "alien", or whether followers of "alien" faiths have greater or less freedom of religion and belief than followers of "non-alien" faiths. They also refused to explain why the calendars were confiscated and destroyed instead of being returned to sender.

---

## **Detention extended, no Bible reading allowed**

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (04.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2XM51Pg> - A court in the northern city of Khujand has again extended the pre-trial detention of 68-year-old Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Shamil Khakimov until 26 June. He was arrested in February and is being investigated on criminal charges of allegedly "inciting religious hatred", which carry a jail term of between five and ten years. But his real "crime" seems to be that the regime thinks he leads Khujand's Jehovah's Witness community.

Khakimov, a widower, suffers from high blood pressure and underwent major leg surgery not long before his February arrest.

The court can legally continue extending Khakimov's pre-trial detention for up to one year – to 26 February 2020 – and an April extension of the detention took place illegally without his lawyer being informed (see below).

Against international human rights standards, prisoner of conscience Khakimov is not being allowed to read his Bible (see below).

In 2016 seven imam-hatyps of state-controlled cathedral mosques in Sogd Region were jailed, apparently for being educated abroad and being devout Muslims, and their sentences are due to expire between March and August 2019. But the regime is refusing to say when they will be released (see below).

However, relatives of alleged Salafi Muslim Mukhtadi Abdulkodyrov, arrested in December 2018, said a Dushanbe court released him on parole in mid-March 2019 (see below).

### **Pre-trial detention again extended**

Jehovah's Witness Shamil Rasulovich Khakimov (born 30 January 1951), a retired widower, arrested on 26 February and then put in pre-trial detention, has had his detention extended twice.

Khujand City Court in the northern Sogd Region extended his detention for one month on 23 April, and then for a further month on 24 May. His pre-trial detention will now last until 26 June, Jehovah's Witnesses who wish to remain anonymous told Forum 18 on 27 May.

They pointed out that the authorities can legally continue extending the pre-trial detention for up to one year – to 26 February 2020.

Judge Abruniso Mirasilzoda of Khujand City Court, who ordered the initial pre-trial detention, refused to explain the repeated extensions of the detention to Forum 18 on 29 May.

### **"Inciting religious hatred", no arrests or prosecution of torturers**

Khakimov is being investigated for allegedly "inciting religious hatred", but his real "crime" appears to be that police think he leads Khujand's Jehovah's Witness community.

Prisoner of conscience Khakimov's arrest came after police found his phone number on the phones of two female Jehovah's Witnesses they arrested for sharing their beliefs on the street. Investigator Nekruz Ibromkhimzoda of the Sogd Regional Police Organised Crime Department called Khakimov's number as well as other numbers on the phones, and then

arrested Khakimov.

Prisoner of conscience Khakimov's arrest followed raids and interrogations, in some cases involving torture, against Jehovah's Witnesses in Sogd Region and other religious communities nationwide.

Despite Tajikistan's binding international obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, no arrests or prosecutions appear to have taken place against officials who tortured Jehovah's Witnesses.

### **Detention extended without lawyer, appeal refused**

On 23 April Khujand City Court extended Khakimov's pre-trial detention until 26 May, but illegally his lawyer was not informed of the court hearing. The detention was extended at the request of Investigator Nosirkhuja Dodokhonzoda of Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office, who is now leading the case.

Police had without explanation and illegally refused to allow a defence lawyer to be present during Khakimov's initial February interrogation.

On 29 April Sogd Regional Court rejected an appeal brought by Jehovah's Witnesses against the extension of Khakimov's pre-trial detention.

Madina Mukumzoda, head of Khujand City Court's Chancellery, refused on 29 May to discuss the case with Forum 18.

Prisoner of conscience Khakimov is being held under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 2 ("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"). If tried and convicted he could be jailed for between five and 10 years, with an additional ban on specified activity.

Prisoner of conscience Khakimov is currently held in Khujand's Investigation Prison:

Ya/S 9/2 Investigation Prison  
Khujand  
Sogd Region

### **No Bible reading allowed**

Khakimov's lawyer can visit him in prison. "His health is comparatively good, and he is being given medicines," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 4 June. "He can pray but he is not permitted to read his Bible."

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules - A/C.3/70/L.3) require governments to respect the freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of prisoners.

"So far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his or her religious life by attending the services provided in the prison and having in his or her possession the books of religious observance and instruction of his or her denomination", Rule 66 notes.

Prisoner of conscience Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, who led a Protestant Church in Khujand, was jailed for three years in July 2017 under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'".

A Tajik Protestant who wishes to remain unnamed for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 27 May that Pastor Kholmatov "was visited in prison recently, and is seemingly doing fine".

### **Will jailed Sogd Muslims be released?**

In early March 2016, seven imam-hatyps of state-controlled cathedral mosques in Sogd Region were arrested on the initiative of the Regional Prosecutor's Office.

Sulaymon Boltuyev was Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Guliston (former Kayrakkum), Maksud Urunov Imam of the cathedral Mosque in Kanibadam, and Abdujamil Yusufi of the cathedral Mosque in Bobojon Gofurov District. The other arrested imams were: Abbos Abdurakhmanov, Imam Urunov's deputy at the Kanibadam Cathedral Mosque; Khuseyn Tukhtayev, another imam-hatyp from Kanibadam's Cathedral Mosque; Hamzaali Sultanov of Khujand's Takvo Mosque; and Makhdi Boltayev (an Uzbek citizen) of Isfara's Navgilem Mosque.

Bobojon Gofurov District Court sentenced all seven of the imams in June 2016 to between three years and three years and four months' imprisonment in strict regime labour camps.

The jailings appear to have been part of a State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) campaign to identify and fire all foreign-educated imams. Many other Muslims, including imams, were jailed at the same time for similar reasons.

The seven imams' sentences are due to expire between March and August 2019, but officials are refusing to say whether they will be released.

An official who refused to give his name, but is an assistant to Lieutenant-General Mansurjon Umarov, Head of the Justice Ministry's Chief Directorate of Enforcement of Criminal Punishments, told Forum 18 on 29 May 2019 that the seven imams were prosecuted 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".

The official added that "those who are punished under such charges cannot be amnestied. They must serve their sentence till the end". However, he refused to say when the imams will be released, or if any have already been released.

Lieutenant-General Umarov's assistant asked Forum 18 to call back the next day, 30 May, but has not answered his phone then or subsequently.

### **2017 Sogd arrests, harsher jail sentences**

The jailing of the seven imams seems to have been the beginning of a wave of jailings in Sogd. In September 2017 42-year old Imam Ilkhomidin Abdulloev of the Chorrukh-Dorun Mosque in a suburb of Guliston and four members of the Mosque community, one of whom is named Kasymov, were arrested. In November 2017 all were jailed for five and half years.

Human rights defender Faiziniso Vakhidova told Forum 18 in December 2017 that Imam Abdulloev is "not an extremist at all, but a very peaceful believer" and a disciple of Imam

Boltuyev who was imprisoned earlier under similar "extremism" charges. "Imam Abdulloyev may have been arrested for that reason", human rights defender Vakhidova commented.

Also jailed in Sogd Region between August and December 2017 were other male Muslim prisoners of conscience, including a well-known heart surgeon. All were accused of being adherents of Salafi Islam, a movement banned since 2009.

None of those jailed appears to have called for or committed any violation of the human rights of others, and officials refused to explain what exactly they had done wrong. But it appears that their "crime" was to be identified by regime officials as being devout Muslims. All received prison terms of at least five years.

### **Alleged Salafi released on parole with restrictions**

About three months after his arrest, Dushanbe's Ismoili Somoni District Court handed alleged Salafi Muslim Mukhtadi Abdulkodyrov a term under probation. He was released on parole in mid-March, his relatives told Radio Free Europe (RFE) on 23 March. Tajikistan has banned Salafi Islam since 2009 as "extremist".

Abdulkodyrov must not change his permanent place of residence, work, or education without notifying the authorities, the Court told RFE. If he does not follow these restrictions he can be taken back into custody.

The National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested Abdulkodyrov on 1 December 2018 after his return from working in Saudi Arabia, despite writing a letter of "repentance" at the request of officials before his return.

Prosecutors originally investigated Abdulkodyrov under Criminal Code Article 307, Part 2 ("organising the activity of an extremist organisation"). However, in January 2019 this was changed to a charge under 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"). This carries a maximum jail term of five years.

An Ismoili Somoni District Court Chancellery official (who refused to give his name) on 29 May 2019 still refused to discuss Abdulkodyrov's punishment and referred Forum 18 to Court Chair Gayrat Sanginzoda. He did not answer his phone on either 29 or 30 May. Nor did Lieutenant-General Mansurjon Umarov, head of the Justice Ministry's Chief Directorate of Enforcement of Criminal Punishments, on 30 May.

---

## **Jehovah's Witness jailed for four months for reading banned Bible**

***Shamil Rasulovich Khakimov is a 68-year-old pensioner. He was arrested in February and was interrogated in the absence of a lawyer. The ban on the sacred text of his religion violates international norms on the treatment of prisoners.***

AsiaNews.it (08.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IblK9o> - A 68-year-old pensioner, Jehovah's Witness (JW), will have to remain in prison for another month, having already spent three behind bars, and will not be able to have the Bible to pray.

This was established by the court of Khujand, in Tajikistan, extending the pre-trial

detention regime until 26 June. The man was arrested in February on charges of "incitement to religious hatred", for which he risks going to jail for five to 10 years. However Forum 18 activists follow the case believe that he is a prisoner of conscience and is punished because he is considered the head of the local JW community.

The pensioner is called Shamil Rasulovich Khakimov and is a widower. The man is not the first JW to be targeted by the authorities of the Sogd region, who are carrying out a crackdown also against the Muslim community. The inmate has health problems: he suffers from high blood pressure and underwent a delicate leg surgery just before the arrest. Judge Abruniso Mirasilzoda, who ordered the first incarceration, did not want to explain the reasons for the extension of the prison regime.

Khakimov was stopped because his cell phone number appeared in the phone book of two JW women arrested while proselytizing on the street. Activists complain that his detention is illegal because the interrogation to validate the detention in February took place in the absence of the lawyer. Furthermore, the subsequent sentence of extension of the arrest, in April, was pronounced without warning to the lawyer.

The lawyer was able to meet the pensioner in prison and reports: "His health is quite good and he is given medicine. He can pray but he is not allowed to have the Bible. " According to the group this violates the United Nations Rules on the minimum standard for the treatment of prisoners (known as "Mandela Rules"). The rule n. 66 in fact states that "so far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his or her religious life by attending the services provided in the prison and having in his or her possession the books of religious observance and instruction of his or her denomination".

---

## **Tajikistan mulls reopening more than 590 mosques that had been closed down in previous years**

***Tajikistan reportedly plans to reopen 594 mosques that had been closed down in the previous years. The work is going on but it is unknown when the mosques will be reopened.***

The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) under the Government of Tajikistan has sent the list of 594 mosques for consideration to President's Executive Office with solicitation to reopen them, an official source at the CRA told Asia-Plus today morning.

According to him, President's Executive Office has asked the CA to submit this list.

"We have received instruction from President's Executive Office to make a list of mosques that could be reopened. Such a decision was made by the President following numerous requests from citizens. It is about mosques that were closed down in jamoats," the source added.

Recall, the CRA head told reporters in Dushanbe on February 6 that a special commission has been set up to assess whether the country needs to build new mosques and reopen some of the places of worship that had been closed down by authorities in the previous years. The commission reportedly should submit its findings to the government, which will later decide where mosques should be built or reopened.

Authorities reopened dozens of mosques across the country last year.

About 10 years ago, the government launched a campaign that led to the closure of hundreds of mosques across the country. Some were turned into tea houses, public baths, and beauty salons.

The move has been criticized by rights groups and many Tajiks, who complain that they don't have a place of worship close to where they live.

---

## **Jailed, awaiting trial on "incitement" charges**

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (20.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2PhKOBq> - On 28 February, two days after his arrest, a court in the northern city of Khujand ordered that 68-year old Jehovah's Witness Shamil Khakimov be held in pre-trial detention for up to two months. Prosecutors are preparing a criminal case against him on charges of "inciting religious hatred", charges he rejects. Khakimov, who suffers from high blood pressure and recently underwent a leg operation, faces between five and ten years' imprisonment if eventually tried and convicted.

Khakimov is currently held at Khujand's Investigation Prison.

Judge Abruniso Mirasilzoda, who acceded to the Prosecutor's Office request to put Khakimov in pre-trial detention despite his medical condition, refused to explain her decision to Forum 18 (see below).

A panel of three judges at Sogd Regional Court upheld Khakimov's pre-trial detention on 12 March. None of the judges were prepared to discuss with Forum 18 why they approved the detention of the 68-year-old, given his serious state of health (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to reach Nosirkhuja Dodokhonzoda, Investigator of serious crimes at Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office, who is leading the criminal case against Khakimov (see below).

Police opened the case against Khakimov after widespread raids in January and February on homes and police interrogations of Jehovah's Witnesses across the northern Sogd Region. Some of the interrogations involved torture.

Organised Crime Police seized Khakimov's Bible and other religious literature during a raid on his home after they interrogated him (see below).

After the raids and interrogations, so far none of the Jehovah's Witnesses were given any punishments or faced any charges except for Khakimov. "The authorities probably want to punish a Jehovah's Witness more seriously in order for this to be a show case, a lesson for the rest of the Jehovah's Witnesses," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 19 March. "This may be why Khakimov was singled out."

Jehovah's Witnesses in Khujand are still being regularly summoned and questioned by the Organised Crime Police, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. The Police summon individuals for interrogation "without written notifications".

### **Organised Crime Police prepare Khakimov's arrest**

Trouble began for Jehovah's Witness Shamil Rasulovich Khakimov (born 30 August 1950), a retired widower, after police stopped two Jehovah's Witnesses on the street in Khujand in early January for sharing their beliefs with a passer-by.

"The Police seized the phones of the two women and called the numbers in the phone, and

this is how they found Khakimov," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "The authorities allege that he is the leader of Jehovah's Witnesses in Khujand."

On the evening of 28 January, Khakimov received a call from an unknown person. "The caller requested him to leave his flat and come out onto the street. It was dark so he hesitated, but the calls kept coming," Jehovah's Witnesses said. "When he decided to come outside, there was no one on the street."

Later the caller identified himself as Nekruz Ibrokhimzoda from the Organised Crime Police of Sogd Region.

The next day, 29 January, Organised Crime Police officers summoned some of Khakimov's friends (who are not Jehovah's Witnesses) and fellow believers, and questioned them about him.

At lunch time on 1 February, three days after this, the Organised Crime Police's Khujand office summoned Khakimov, where officers searched him on arrival. Lieutenant Colonel Sukhrob Rustamzoda then interrogated him, including about his personal history, how he became a Jehovah's Witness, and the structure of the organisation.

"During the interrogation, officers refused to allow Khakimov to use the services of a defence lawyer," Jehovah's Witnesses complained.

Investigator Rustamzoda refused to comment on the case. "I cannot discuss it with you over the phone," he told Forum 18 on 19 March. "You need to talk to Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office. They are investigating the case now." When Forum 18 insisted, asking why Police opened a case against Khakimov and why he was refused a defence lawyer to participate during his interrogation, Rustamzoda put the phone down.

### **Officers seize Khakimov's property**

After the interrogation, the Organised Crime Police brought Khakimov to his flat in Khujand. Officers seized his tablet device, laptop computer, his Bible and several religious books and brochures, as well as his passport. Officers did not give him a copy of the seizure record, Jehovah's Witnesses said.

The Police "detained him overall for eight hours the same day," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. "He had not fully recovered after the thrombophlebitis surgery on his legs and his bandages needed to be changed."

Moreover, Khakimov "could not receive money transfers to continue his necessary medical treatment, since officers seized his passport".

### **Prosecutor's Office ignores complaints, opens case**

On 3 February, Khakimov filed a complaint with the Regional Prosecutor's Office against the actions of the Organised Crime Police officers. "No answer has been received to this day," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

"Instead at around 9 am on 7 February, four days after his complaint, the Organised Crime Police officers once again arrived at Khakimov's home. They threatened him to open the door," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "As the Police officers refused to provide the official summons, he decided not to open the door."

During the same day, the Police "repeatedly called Khakimov demanding him to come to

the police station."

Khakimov filed another complaint to the Regional Prosecutor's Office on 7 February against the actions of the Organised Crime Police. "At the Prosecutor's Office he was asked to write an additional statement on his faith and religious activity." The Prosecutor's Office, however, "refused to give him a note that he was asked to write a statement and that it had received his complaint."

The Prosecutor's Office has "not responded to this complaint to this day either".

### **Arrest, pre-trial detention**

On 26 February, 19 days after his second complaint, Police arrested Khakimov and put him in custody "despite his advanced age and poor health".

The following day, on 27 February, the Organised Crime Police went to Khakimov's flat again. "Without showing identification documents - in the absence of Khakimov and the presence of his roommate - seized Khakimov's international passport without drawing up a record of it," Jehovah's Witnesses said.

On 28 February, at the request of the Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office, Judge Abruniso Mirasilzoda of Khujand City Court ordered that Khakimov be held in pre-trial detention. He is being held in the Investigation Prison in Khujand.

Judge Mirasilzoda told Forum 18 from the court on 19 March that "his custody may last up two months while the investigation proceeds, and if need be his arrest can be prolonged." She refused to explain why Khakimov needs to be held in custody. Asked why he cannot be at home while his case is being investigated, she told Forum 18: "I gave my decision, and it entered into force."

Asked why she did not take into account that Khakimov is an old man who recently underwent an operation on his leg, Judge Mirasilzoda replied: "His lawyer informed us about this orally, but did not present documents." Asked whether had Khakimov had the documents, she would not have ordered the pre-trial detention, she responded: "I do not want to discuss my decision further."

Jehovah's Witnesses say the court was fully aware of Khakimov's medical condition. "On 28 February our lawyer did not yet have the documents from the doctors on Khakimov's operation, so they told Judge Mirasilzoda that Khakimov can open the bandage on his leg and show the wound, as well as producing the documents later. But she went ahead with her decision."

Khakimov's address in Investigation Prison:

Ya/S 9/2 Investigation Prison, Khujand, Sogd Region, Tajikistan

### **Why pre-trial detention?**

Jehovah's Witnesses appealed against the 28 February decision to place Khakimov in pre-trial detention. They presented in court documentation on his operation and health condition. But on 12 March, a panel of three judges at Sogd Regional Court, Ismoil Rakhmatzoda, Maftuna Rakhmatillozoda and Khotamsho Sattorzoda, upheld Khakimov's pre-trial detention.

Asked on 20 March why the Court upheld the pre-trial detention of Khakimov, an ailing old man, Makhrambek Jumazoda, Secretary of Judge Rakhmatzoda, took down the question

and Forum 18's name. Then, after consulting with an official in Judge Rakhmatzoda's office, claimed to Forum 18 that the Judge is "busy in a meeting". He then refused to talk further.

Judge Rakhmatillozoda on 20 March also refused to explain their decision. Asked why the Court did not take into account the official records of Khakimov's condition and upheld his pre-trial detention, she responded: "I just came into my office. Can you call back in 15 minutes?" Called back later, she told Forum 18 "I cannot talk to you," and put the phone down.

Judge Sattorzoda was adamant that the Court "correctly took the decision to put Khakimov in custody". Reminded that Khakimov presented to the Court the documents confirming his medical condition and that he is an old man, Sattorzoda repeated his previous response: "We took the decision correctly." He refused to explain the decision to Forum 18 and to answer further questions.

### **Inciting hatred?**

Nosirkhuja Dodokhonzoda, Investigator of serious crimes at Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office, is leading the case against Khakimov. On 7 March, one week after Khakimov's arrest, Dodokhonzoda officially informed him of the charges against him.

Dodokhonzoda is investigating Khakimov under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 2 ("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" when performed repeatedly, by a group or by an individual using their official position). Punishment is imprisonment of between five and ten years, with the possibility also of a five-year ban on specified activity.

Prisoner of conscience Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, who led a Protestant Church in Khujand, was punished under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 1 for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'". Khujand City Court sentenced him to three years' imprisonment in July 2017.

Asked why the Prosecutor's Office asked for Khakimov's pre-trial detention, and why it did not respond to Khakimov complaints on the Police illegal actions, the official (who did not give his name) who on 19 March answered the phone of Khobibullo Vokhidov, Prosecutor of Sogd Region, took down Forum 18's name and asked it to wait on the line. Moments later, he told Forum 18 that "Prosecutor Vokhidov is busy; call back in an hour or so."

Called back later, the Prosecutor's phone numbers were all switched to a fax machine.

Prosecutor's Office Investigator Dodokhonzoda did not answer his phones on 20 March.

### **Health concerns**

Jehovah's Witnesses express concern over Khakimov's health. "He recently had an operation on the veins in his legs and suffers from high blood pressure," they told Forum 18 on 19 March. "At the moment he is still suffering from high blood pressure, and the doctors have told him not to stand for too long because of the operation."

Jehovah's Witnesses added that although Khakimov is "doing well", he still feels pain in his leg after the surgery. "Our lawyer talked to the prison doctor and he said that he will make sure that Shamil Khakimov would not have to stand up every time officers enter the cell for checking."

## **Earlier raids, interrogations**

The Organised Crime Police Department of Sogd Region interrogated about 17 Jehovah's Witnesses for periods of up to 14 hours in January and February across the northern Sogd Region, including in Khujand and Konibodom. Police also confiscated mobile phones, personal computers or tablets, and internal passports from those they interrogated.

One female Jehovah's Witness was interrogated two days running for 14 hours. Because of the extreme stress imposed on her, she suffered a stroke, leaving her unable to walk or speak. She was then taken to hospital.

Jehovah's Witnesses lodged a formal complaint about the police actions and torture to Sogd Regional Prosecutor's Office. "But it has taken no action and given no response to this day," Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

"After the female Witness complained to President Emomali Rahmon, Sogd Regional Police informed her in writing on 6 March that it is investigating the complaint," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "However, she has not been informed on the course or the results of the investigation to this day."

Asked on 20 March about the investigation of this case and Khakimov's case, officials at the General Prosecutor's Office reception (who did not give their names) referred Forum 18 to its international relations section's Makhmudzoda and Karimzoda (first names were not given). The officials' phones went unanswered the same day. Called back, the reception officials refused to put Forum 18 through to any other officials to discuss the cases.

---

## **Children barred from attending church**

World Watch Monitor (25.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FO47tV> - Tajik authorities implementing a new religion law are barring children from attending religious services and have burned thousands of calendars with Bible verses.

Amendments to Tajikistan's Religion Law came into force in January last year, giving the state greater control over religious education, and increase the amount of information religious organisations must pass on to the state.

The State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) now demands "all kinds of information on the number of members, finances and activities", a member of a religious community told Oslo-based news agency Forum 18 anonymously, fearing reprisals.

They also gather information about the number of children under the age of 10 attending religious meetings, using the Religion Law and the Parental Responsibility Law to put pressure on parents and religious communities.

In December, Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojyev, the SCRA official responsible for non-Muslim communities, made an unannounced visit to a religious community to obtain information. Forum 18 did not reveal the name of the community, to prevent reprisals.

"While Tukhtakhojyev was present, a few children under the age of 10 came in to the meeting to see their parents briefly," a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous, told Forum 18.

"Tukhtakhojayev did not say anything during the meeting, but a few days later summoned the leaders of the religious community for questioning. He then forced them to write a statement explaining the reasons why the children were present in the meeting."

A few days later, the community was fined the equivalent to almost eight months' average wage for violating the Religion Law.

### ***'Religious propaganda'***

In the same month, 5,000 calendars with Bible verses, which were imported by the Baptist Church, were confiscated by custom officials and destroyed. The Church also received a fine of about four months' average wage for "producing, distributing, importing, or exporting religious literature and items of a religious nature which have not passed through the compulsory prior state religious censorship".

A customs official told Radio Free Europe that inspection had shown the calendars had "elements of propaganda of an alien faith", Forum 18 reported.

SCRA spokesperson Afshin Mukim told the radio broadcaster that "propaganda of a religion must be done only within the Baptist Church, and the calendars had religious propaganda in them", and said the number of calendars was greater than the number of Baptists in the country, according to the news agency.

Tajikistan is a Central Asian country with the highest percentage of Muslims, approximately 97%, but the former Soviet republic is determined to be secular and to keep Islam under control.

### ***Target of persecution***

Of the eight "Persecution Engines" the international religious-freedom watchdog Open Doors measures, 'Islamic oppression' and 'dictatorial paranoia' has made Tajik Christians a target of persecution.

Christian converts from a Muslim background are most vulnerable to persecution in Tajikistan, in particular from family, friends and the community, Open Doors says. Non-traditional Christian communities, like the Baptist Church, also suffer from raids, threats, arrests and fines by authorities.

The Central Asian country is 29th on the 2019 Open Doors World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

### **HRWF Comment**

See our [FORB and Blasphemy Prisoners Database](#): 23 FORB Prisoners (22 Muslims, 1 Protestant).

---

## **Raid, torture, interrogations, fines, calendars destroyed**

***Religious communities including Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for worship continue to be raided, with interrogations lasting between 20 minutes and 14 hours and in some cases involving torture. Other religious communities also face renewed questioning, especially on finances, and whether children under the age of 10 attend meetings.***

By Mushfig Bayram

Forum 18 (22.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2HklqoS> - Police in Tajikistan continue to raid groups of Jehovah's Witnesses meeting together for worship, with interrogations being carried out for between 20 minutes and 14 hours. During the interrogations police have forced people to sign statements that they were not tortured, yet some detainees have been tortured. Contrary to the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Tajikistan has neither arrested officials suspected of torture, nor put them on criminal trial.

From January 2019, State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) officials have renewed demands to religious communities of all beliefs to give the SCRA "all kinds of information on the number of their members, finances and activities", a member of one religious community who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Officials have been particularly interested in community finances, as well as whether children under the age of 10 attend meetings (see below).

The demands follow January 2018 Religion Law changes, but officials act as if there are no legal controls on their actions. One religious community in early 2019 asked Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojajev, who is responsible within the SCRA for non-Muslim communities, for a formal written request for the information he wanted. He replied that he will not put anything in writing, claiming that "you need to obey my verbal commands". He also claimed: "My verbal commands are the law as I represent the law.

If you don't obey my verbal commands you will be in trouble. We [the SCRA] will come and take any documents we want" (see below).

After Tukhtakhojajev visited a community to demand information and saw children under the age of 10 present with their parents, a fine equivalent to almost eight months' average wage was imposed (see below).

"Mosques have stopped being a social institution, and have become some kind of state agency," a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. "Imams are known to share all information on mosque community members with state agencies" (see below).

In December 2018 customs officers at Dushanbe Airport confiscated 5,000 calendars with New Testament verses that Baptists were importing. The calendars were later destroyed and a fine equivalent to about four months average wage imposed. One Customs official told Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) that "after linguistic experts in the Culture Ministry .. found elements of propaganda of an alien faith, the calendars were confiscated". Officials have refused to explain to Forum 18 why the state might regard some faiths as "alien", or whether followers of "alien" faiths have greater or less freedom of religion and belief than followers of "non-alien" faiths. They have also refused to explain why the calendars were confiscated and destroyed instead of being returned to sender (see below).

Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Daniil Islamov, who was jailed for refusing to do military service, has filed a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee (see below).

## ***Raids, interrogations for up to 14 hours***

Police have continued to raid groups of Jehovah's Witnesses meeting together for worship. The regime banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 2007.

Across the northern Sogd Region, including in Khujand and Konibodom, the police Organised Crime Department has been raiding homes of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout January and February. Police are known to have interrogated about 17 people for periods of between 20 minutes and 14 hours, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 15 February. Police also confiscated some mobile phones, personal computers or tablets, and internal passports from those they interrogated.

Asked on 21 February why police are raiding Jehovah's Witnesses meeting for worship in their homes, and why Tajikistan has banned the community, Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) in the capital Dushanbe replied: "I am not competent to answer you on this question." He refused to put Forum 18 through to any official who could answer this.

## ***Torture***

During the interrogations, police in Sogd Region compelled those detained to complete a questionnaire about Jehovah's Witness beliefs, as well as to state in writing that they were not tortured by police during the interrogations.

Under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Tajikistan is obliged to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed torture, and to try them under criminal law.

One female Jehovah's Witness was interrogated two days running for 14 hours. As a result of the extreme stress imposed on her she suffered a stroke, leaving her unable to walk or speak. She was then taken to hospital.

Jehovah's Witnesses lodged a formal complaint about the interrogation and torture to the Regional Public Prosecutor, but it has taken no action and has made no response.

The duty officer of Sogd Regional Police (who refused to give his name) told Forum 18 from Khujand on 21 February that freedom of religion and belief cases were dealt with by the Organised Crime Department. Khurshed Raupov, Deputy Head of the Organised Crime Department, told Forum 18 that "I understand you very well but cannot answer" when questioned about the raids and torture. He then put the phone down and did not answer subsequent phone calls.

## ***Earlier police torture unpunished***

In an earlier case of torture, on 21 January 2018 in Khujand a Jehovah's Witness was summoned to a police station where during a four-hour interrogation, police officer Husrav Usupov beat him until he suffered concussion. Police then released him and he went to a hospital for treatment. Police forced the hospital not to provide medical test results, and forced a doctor to write a false statement denying the injuries. The victim's wife complained to the Prosecutor's Office about her husband's torture.

However, on 1 February 2018 the chief of Khujand Police and the head of the police Criminal Investigation Department summoned the victim and his wife for interrogation. Police ordered the couple to write a statement that they were Jehovah's Witnesses, so fearing for their safety they moved elsewhere, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

### ***Large scale secret police raid***

In the capital Dushanbe on 5 October 2018, the National Security Service (NSS) secret police detained a group of 18 Jehovah's Witnesses, including some children, leaving a home after they met for worship. The NSS detained most of the men, women and children for questioning, apart from eight women. One of those detained was Russian, and the NSS threatened to deport him and suggest that Russia prosecute him for "extremism". (Jehovah's Witnesses are also banned in Russia.)

The 10 detainees were eventually released after many hours of questioning, and have been threatened with prosecution for their exercise of freedom of religion and belief.

### ***Fined for parents bringing children to meeting***

In December 2018, Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayev of the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) visited one religious community without any warning or invitation to demand information, a human rights defender who knows the community but is not part of it told Forum 18. Tukhtakhojayev is responsible within the SCRA for non-Muslim communities.

"While Tukhtakhojayev was present, a few children under the age of 10 came in to the meeting to see their parents briefly," the human rights defender who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals stated. "Tukhtakhojayev did not say anything during the meeting, but a few days later summoned the leaders of the religious community for questioning. He then forced them to write a statement explaining the reasons why the children were present in the meeting."

The community was then under Administrative Code Article 474 ("Violation of the Religion Law") fined 7,700 Somonis, which is equivalent to almost eight months' average wage. The religious community itself also does not want to be named for fear of state reprisals.

The regime through the Religion law and the Parental Responsibility Law imposes severe restrictions on freedom of religion and belief and related rights, such as the rights of the child and the freedoms of expression and association. This includes warning religious communities not to allow children to be at meetings for worship.

### ***5,000 Baptist calendars destroyed***

On 18 December 2018, customs officers at Dushanbe Airport confiscated 5,000 religious calendars that Baptists were importing, a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 14 February. The calendars had photos for each of the 12 months of 2019, and had one quotation from the New Testament for each month.

The calendars were being imported by Dushanbe's state-registered Baptist Church. However Rahmonali Rahimzoda of the Customs Service told Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL) on 14 February that "following the conclusion of linguistic experts in the Culture Ministry that found elements of propaganda of an alien faith, the calendars were confiscated".

"The Baptist calendars only had Bible verses on them," a local Protestant who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 21 February. "Unfortunately, this means that our authorities consider that the Bible is an alien book in Tajikistan."

Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the SCRA did not answer when asked by Forum 18 on 21 February why the state might regard some faiths as "alien", or whether followers of "alien" faiths have greater or less freedom of religion and belief than followers of "non- alien" faiths.

The Church was fined 4,000 Somonis, which is about four months' average wage, under Administrative Code Article 474-1. This punishes producing, distributing, importing, or exporting religious literature and items of a religious nature which have not passed through the compulsory prior state religious censorship.

SCRA spokesperson Afshin Mukim told RFE/RL that the calendars were confiscated "because propaganda of a religion must be done only within the Baptist Church, and the calendars had religious propaganda in them". He also claimed that the numbers of calendars exceeded the number of Baptists in the country.

The authorities destroyed the calendars in January 2019, "as they were imported without prior censorship and the permission of the SCRA," Customs spokesperson Boymurod Faizulloyev told Forum 18 on 15 February. He would not explain why the calendars were destroyed, or why the Baptist Church was fined. Faizulloyev also refused to explain why the calendars were not sent back to the sender instead of being destroyed.

Sukhrob Odinayev, an "expert" of the Religious "Expert Analysis" Section of the Culture Ministry, adamantly denied that the Ministry gave an "expert opinion" on the calendars. "I don't know why Mavlanov and the Customs Service told you and the press that we gave such an expert opinion, but it is not true," he told Forum 18 on 22 February. He further declined to discuss the issue with Forum 18 or answer other questions.

Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the SCRA also refused to explain why the calendars were destroyed and Baptists fined. "We have nothing to do with that," he claimed to Forum 18 on 21 February.

Mavlanov did not answer when asked why the SCRA did not raise with the Customs Service or other authorities whether the destruction of calendars with Bible verses on them was a legal and appropriate action.

### ***"My verbal commands are the law..."***

In January 2019 State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) officials renewed demands to religious communities of all beliefs to give the SCRA "all kinds of information on the number of their members, finances and activities", a member of one religious community who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 in mid-January.

Officials have been particularly interested in community finances, as well as whether children under the age of 10 attend meetings.

The SCRA questions follow January 2018 changes to the Religion Law. An amendment to Article 19 requires all religious communities to provide the SCRA "on request with information on the sources of income, inventory of its property, expenditure of its resources, number of its employees, salaries paid, the sums of taxes paid and other necessary information".

The amendment to Article 19 also requires religious communities to help SCRA officials to "familiarise themselves with their religious activity in connection with their carrying out of the goals in their statute and the observance of laws".

But even before these changes, the SCRA illegally demanded that religious communities had to complete a detailed SCRA questionnaire every year. The regime imposed the January 2018 changes without consultation, and break Tajikistan's legally-binding international human rights obligations.

Even after the changes, officials act as if there are no legal controls on their actions. One religious community in early 2019 asked Mukhiddin Tukhtakhojayev of the SCRA for a formal written request for the information he wanted, as he is responsible within the SCRA for non-Muslims communities. He replied that he will not put anything in writing, and claimed that "you need to obey my verbal commands".

Tukhtakhojayev then claimed: "My verbal commands are the law as I represent the law. If you don't obey my verbal commands you will be in trouble. We [the SCRA] will come and take any documents we want."

Tukhtakhojayev on 14 February refused to answer Forum 18's questions, claiming: "I cannot talk to you over the phone." Contradicting his behaviour towards various religious communities, he then demanded "please send your questions in writing" before putting the phone down.

### ***"Give us any information whenever we ask for it"***

A member of another religious community, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 in February 2019 that some religious communities in December 2018 asked the SCRA to hold a round table explaining the January 2018 legal changes. After frequent raids in 2018, "religious communities wanted the SCRA to explain how they can carry out their normal exercise freedom of religion and belief without SCRA interference, and without the fear of being punished", the community member told Forum 18.

The SCRA refused to hold a round table, and replied that "religious communities must obey the law and give us any information whenever we ask for it".

### ***Mosques "have become some kind of state agency"***

Mosques and Muslims exercising freedom of religion and belief are targeted for particularly severe state restrictions, imposed through the state-controlled Council of Ulems [Islamic scholars] and other state agencies. These include restrictions introduced in 2017 on how Islamic festivals and the haj pilgrimage are marked. Beard and hijab-wearing bans continue to be enforced, forcing one couple to divorce. Police have set up roadblocks to enforce the bans, which are also been enforced in schools and universities.

The January 2018 amendments to the Religion Law also imposed tighter SCRA controls over building and opening new mosques. According to the amended Article 8, mosque communities require SCRA permission to use specific buildings for worship, while the SCRA also needs to approve the local authorities' plans to allocate land to build a mosque. SCRA permission is required for the appointment of ordinary imams, imam-hatyps (who give sermons) and sar-hatyps (the head of a mosque).

"Mosques have stopped being a social institution, and have become some kind of state agency," a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 12 February 2019. "Imams are known to share all information on mosque community members with state agencies."

The human rights defender also pointed out that another sign of mosques becoming a state agency was that they now handed over "a big portion of their income to the SCRA". Corruption is widespread in Tajikistan, and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2018 ranks the country close to the bottom, in 152nd place out of 180 countries worldwide.

SCRA and Council of Ulems officials refused to discuss their control of mosques and restrictions on everyone's freedom of religion and belief with Forum 18, or put Forum 18 through to anyone who would discuss these issues.

Asked on 21 February why the SCRA collects money from mosques, Abdurakhmon Mavlanov of the SCRA in Dushanbe did not answer and put the phone down.

Haji Nigmatullo Olimov, Deputy Chair of the Council of Ulems, refused to say whether and how much money the Council collected from individual mosques. On 15 February he first asked to speak "after lunch", but then did not answer his phone that afternoon. On 21 February he claimed that "I cannot hear you well", although Forum 18 could hear him clearly. He then put the phone down and did not answer his phone again.

### ***Conscientious objector's complaint to UN Human Rights Committee***

Jehovah's Witness former prisoner of conscience Daniil Islamov was jailed for six months from April to October 2018 for refusing military service although he was willing to do a civilian alternative service. By the time of his release, Islamov had been held for nearly a year after being detained in a military unit in April 2017. The Tajik authorities ignored a call by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention just a week before he was jailed that he should be freed "immediately".

On 24 January 2019, Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee on behalf of former prisoner of conscience Islamov, they told Forum 18 on 15 February.