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Repeated calls for the release of an elderly ill Jehovah's Witness

By Willy Fautré

Shamil Khakimov, a critically ill elderly Jehovah's Witness unlawfully imprisoned for his faith in Tajikistan since February 2019, filed a formal [petition](#) for his release to the nation's president on 8 November. The same petition was filed with the General Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ombudsman.

On 10 November, Supervisory filed an appeal with the [Supreme Court](#), requesting that his case be re-opened and reversed, based on 2022 judgment by the [UN Human Rights Committee \(CCPR\)](#) that declared Tajikistan's ban on Jehovah's Witnesses unlawful and baseless.

On 11 November, a [private complaint/appeal](#) was filed against the trial court decision that refused to release Shamil based on his poor health.

[US Senator Rubio](#) and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) called for his release as well.

State of health

During the 1990s, Khakimov developed sciatic nerve pinching and chronic sciatica. Since 2007, he has suffered from severe circulatory problems in his lower limbs, which required surgery in 2007. His condition worsened in 2017, requiring additional surgery, which was performed that year. Owing to poor vascular circulation, his surgical wounds did not heal and he had an open leg ulcer when he was arrested on 26 February 2019, and subsequently placed in pre-trial detention.

Khakimov also suffers from heart disease (left ventricular hypertrophy) and atherosclerosis of the legs and varicose veins in his lower extremities. He is at a level four risk for hypertension (blood pressure). He has undergone two operations for venectomies (blood clots) in his left leg. Complications have included post-thrombotic syndrome in both legs, with a trophic ulcer on his left foot, and early stages of gangrene. Khakimov no longer has any vision in his right eye, and he can barely see out of his left eye due to progressive glaucoma. On 31 October 2022, he received a certificate attesting to the fact that he is now identified as having a group two disability.

Jarrold Lopes, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, states: "If Shamil isn't released soon and given specialized medical treatment, there is a very real danger that his

imprisonment might become, effectively, a death sentence. We hope the Tajik authorities take immediate action to have Shamil released before it's too late. There is no legal reason, according to Tajik and international law, for a peaceful elderly man like him to be in prison. He should have never been imprisoned. Additionally, in December 2020, over a year after his conviction, Tajikistan decriminalized Shamil's so-called offense. The authorities should have immediately released him then. Instead, prison authorities continue to pressure him to 'repent' and renounce his beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses around the world hope that the Tajik authorities will soon comply with the UN Human Rights Committee's recent judgement, by lifting the unlawful ban and releasing Shamil from prison."

The persecution and the sentencing of Shamil Khakimov to prison

Mr Shamil Khakimov is a 71-year-old widower and pensioner. He was born in the small village of Kaktush, in the district of Rudaki, Tajikistan. In 1976, he married and moved to the capital city of Dushanbe, where for 38 years he worked for *OJSC Tajiktelecom* as a cable lines engineer. Mr Khakimov had two children, a son and a daughter. In 1989, when his son was 12 and daughter was 7, his wife Olya died from cancer and he never remarried. Khakimov became one of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1994. In September 2021, while Khakimov was in prison, his son died from a heart attack. He was not allowed to attend his funeral.

Due to the ban on the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses, their members have been subjected to numerous arrests, detentions, searches, beatings, as well as a deportation.

On 4 June 2009, sixteen Jehovah's Witnesses had a peaceful gathering in a private apartment in Khujand to read and discuss the Bible. Eleven officials, including officers of the State Committee on National Security, forced their way into the apartment, searched it and the participants of the gathering and seized their Bibles, as well as other religious publications. Several participants were subsequently brought to the headquarters of the State Committee on National Security, where they were interrogated for six hours. On an unspecified date, a criminal case was initiated against the participants of that gathering.

It was dismissed in October 2009 after the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. However, the prosecutor reopened the criminal case on other charges.

In September 2019, a court in the northern city of Khujand jailed Shamil Khakimov for seven years and six months for allegedly "inciting religious hatred", though the sentence was subsequently twice shortened. No evidence was produced that Jehovah's Witness Khakimov or his community had harmed anyone, and his real "crime" seems to be that the regime thinks he led Khujand's Jehovah's Witness community.

Registration and ban of Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses have been active in Tajikistan for more than 50 years. In 1994, their organization (RAJW) was granted registration by the then State Committee on Religious Affairs pursuant to the Law "On Religion and Religious Organizations" of 8 December 1990 (the "1990 Religion Law"). On 15 January 1997, the RAJW was re-registered with national status under the amendments to the 1990 Religion Law. On 11 September 2002, the State Committee on Religious Affairs suspended the activities of the RAJW for three months for door-to-door propaganda and propaganda in public places.

On 11 October 2007, the Ministry of Culture banned the RAJW, annulled its charter and determined that the RAJW's registration of 15 January 1997 was unlawful. It concluded that the RAJW repeatedly violated the national legislation, including the Constitution of

Tajikistan and the 1990 Religion Law, by distributing religious publications in public places and door-to-door, which caused discontent on the part of the population.

Photo: Shamil Khakimov – Courtesy of Jehovah Witnesses headquarters

Will Shamil Kakhimov be released after the UN declared illegal the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses ?

HRWF (23.09.2022) - On 7 September 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (CCPR) issued a significant decision against Tajikistan considering that its 11 October 2007 ban on Jehovah's Witnesses is illegal.

Tajikistan had given three reasons for its ruling that Jehovah's Witnesses are allegedly extremist and had be banned:

- (1) advocating for the establishment of alternative civilian service in lieu of compulsory military service;
- (2) distributing fanatical and extremist religious materials, which negatively affected psyche of young people;
- (3) conducting activities that could potentially lead to sectarian conflicts.

In addition, the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court emphasized that the publications distributed by the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses contained extremist and radical religious views, such as that "national pride and obedience to political organizations are a lie of Satan" and that people should not accept blood transfusions.

The CCPR stated that none of the reasons given by Tajikistan can justify the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses (para. 9.7).

The CCPR made the same conclusion about Tajikistan's subsequent refusal to re-register Jehovah's Witnesses, which occurred in 2011 (para. 9.6).

And the CCPR concluded that it is undisputed that the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses is entirely peaceful and that there was no evidence whatsoever that their activity resulted in "numerous complaints" as the government alleged.

In any case, the CCPR concluded that Tajikistan has now "to send to the Committee, within 180 days, information about the measures taken to give effect to the Committee's Views." In addition, "Tajikistan is also requested to publish the Views of the Committee and to have them widely disseminated in the official languages of the country."

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A similar incident occurred on 22 July 2011, when eight Jehovah's Witnesses gathered in a private apartment in Dushanbe to read and discuss the Bible. After a police raid of the apartment, two participants were brought to the police station and interrogated for more than 20 hours by several police officers and officers of the State Committee on National Security.

In September 2019, a court in the northern city of Khujand jailed **Shamil Khakimov** ([link](#) to his case in HRWF Database of prisoners) for seven years and six months for allegedly "inciting religious hatred", though the sentence was subsequently twice shortened. No evidence was produced that Jehovah's Witness Khakimov or his community had harmed anyone, and his real "crime" seems to be that the regime thinks he led Khujand's Jehovah's Witness community. The 71-year old prisoner is in general poor health and gradually losing sight in his left eye but throughout his time in jail he has been denied proper medical treatment. Moreover, in September 2021 he was denied permission to attend the funeral of his only son.

Let us hope that Let us hope Shamil Khakimov will be released after the CCPR ruling.

Registration and ban of Jehovah's Witnesses

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Tajikistan: Authorities intensify war on Ismailis, other Muslims

The only figure that the regime deems worthy of open adulation is President Emomali Rahmon.

Eurasianet (09.09.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3qxxUz1> - Authorities in Tajikistan have within the space of a week forced the closure of two important religious institutions in the capital: a tariqa, or school, used by adherents of the Ismaili Shia faith and a bookshop trading in Islamic literature.

The broadside against the Ismailis, a splinter group of the Shia Muslim faith, fits within a broader pattern of repression of Pamiris, a roughly 230,000-strong minority whose historic homeland in what is known as the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, have been subjected to a sustained security sweeps over recent months.

The Ismaili Tariqa and Religious Education Board was registered in 2012 at the same time as the opening of the first Ismaili Center in Dushanbe. The location was used by followers of Ismaili Shiism for both secular and religious education.

Sources at the center have told Eurasianet that they have been under pressure from the authorities since May to suspend their educational activities. It has been several weeks since the doors of the premises have been closed to the public.

The Ismaili Center, which houses, among other things, a jamatkhana, a place where followers of the faith gather to pray, remains open, although its future also looks bleak in light of the evolving situation.

The state's religious affairs committee has made no public statement on the closure of the Ismaili Tariqa and Religious Education Board. Three years ago, however, the committee [sent a letter](#) to the organization expressing discomfiture at the fact that the portrait of the Ismaili faith leader, the Agha Khan, had been hung above that of the president, Emomali Rahmon.

In the eyes of the government of Tajikistan, no figure holds a more hallowed status than Rahmon.

Official intolerance toward religion extends further than just the Ismailis, however. The government has taken a hostile stance against Islamic education in general. A decade ago, all the country's madrasas were shuttered under the pretext that the Education Ministry was drawing up a sanctioned religious curriculum. The doors of the country's six madrasas never reopened, however.

This past week, the authorities [forced the closure](#) of the only bookstore in Dushanbe dealing in religious literature. A spokesman for the state religious committee said the closure was temporary, pending an inspection of the store's catalogue.

All this has happened despite the fact that around 95 percent of Tajikistan's population self-describes as Muslim.

The only remaining places for pursuing studies in religious matters is the Islamic Institute in Dushanbe, which lies close to the now-shuttered bookshop. Ninth-grade schoolchildren are also required to complete a History of Religion unit.

The clampdown on religion is even more extensive than that.

Children under the age of 18 are forbidden from visiting the mosque. People under 35 are ineligible to apply to perform the hajj to Mecca. Prayer is not allowed in government institutions and members of the public are in effect prohibited from entering government buildings while wearing a hijab or beards grown as a symbol of Islamic piety. There are no courses available for the study of Arabic. Young people pursuing religious studies have been forcibly repatriated over the past several years.

The only legally operating imams are appointed by the religious affairs committee, from whom they draw a salary. Their sermons are prepared in advance by the committee. Countless mosques have been closed. Little prayer rooms dotted around the country have often been dismantled.

This is all a boon to recruiters of underground groups professing radical forms of Islam. The most notorious of these, the Islamic State, has made the fact of the Rahmon regime's repression of blameless Muslims a core pillar of its [recruiting rhetoric](#).

Photo: The Central Mosque in Dushanbe. (Photo: leiris202 / Creative Commons)
