

Religious Freedom in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and the Jehovah's Witnesses

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ABSTRACT: The three post-Soviet Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan do not grant full religious liberty to the Jehovah's Witnesses. In Tajikistan, they have been officially banned since 2007, although the United Nations Human Rights Committee concluded in 2022 that the ban is unlawful. Tajikistan and Russia are the only two post-Soviet countries that have actually banned Jehovah's Witnesses, and in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, their activities are severely limited. This paper traces the roots of these attitudes back to both the Soviet heritage and the strongly negative Muslim attitude towards conversion from Islam to other faiths. It also notes that some improvements have occurred in recent years, after Jehovah's Witnesses took cases from the three countries to the U.N. Human Rights Committee, and the United States criticized the lack of religious liberty there.

KEYWORDS: Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia, Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenistan, Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan.

Introduction

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, a number of Soviet Republics became independent. They adopted their own Constitutions and put in place laws to regulate relations between the state and their various religious communities. This was the case for the five post-Soviet republics of Central Asia. All of them are member states of the United Nations and participating states of the OSCE, but they are not member states of the Council of Europe. Consequently, their citizens do not have access to the European Court of Human Rights. I will analyze here the evolution of legislation and its implementation in the light of international standards in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan respectively.

Tajikistan

1. Legal Status of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses have been practising their religion in the territory of Tajikistan for over seventy years. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, they operated underground, and were subject to persecution by the Communist regime.

According to information provided by the European headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses, the first known court trial took place in 1955, in the city of Stalinobod (Dushanbe). A certain Ernst Fridrikhovich was sentenced to seven years, to be served in camps, for leading the activities of a group of believers. In 1956, he was released as unjustly convicted. Numerous other trials of Jehovah's Witnesses took place during the Soviet era.

On 9 September 1991, Tajikistan declared itself an independent sovereign nation. Soon after independence, civil war broke out between regional groups supporting the government formed by President Rahmon Nabyev (1930–1993) and rebel groups. This lasted for five years. Since 1994, the country has been led by President Emomali Rahmon, who rules within the framework of an authoritarian and repressive regime. According to the Constitution, the state is officially secular, but Sunni Islam is adhered to by over 90% of the 9-million population (U.S. Department of State 2022).

The number of Jehovah's Witnesses is said to be more than 600, although no official statistics are released.

The current Constitution of Tajikistan dates back to 1994, and guarantees freedom of religion in Article 26:

Everyone shall have the right to freely determine his position toward religion, to profess any religion individually or jointly with others or not to profess any, and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies.

In the same year, the first Law on Religion provided the legal basis for religious practice. It demanded that religious groups acquire state registration to be permitted to operate under the protection of the Constitution.

Jehovah's Witnesses were officially registered as a religious community in 1994, 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”), and were thus allowed to exercise freedom of religion. In January 1997, all religious communities were ordered to re-register.

On 11 September 2002, the State Committee on Religious Affairs suspended the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses for three months, allegedly because of their door-to-door proselytism and their propaganda in public places.

On 11 October 2007, the Ministry of Culture banned the association of Jehovah’s Witnesses, annulled its charter, and determined that the former registration was invalid. It concluded that the association had repeatedly violated national legislation, including the Constitution of Tajikistan and the 1990 Religion Law.

The official reasons were Jehovah’s Witnesses’ conscientious objection to military service; their belief that their religion is the only true one; and their public missionary activities, including the distribution of religious publications in public places and door-to-door, which allegedly caused discontent on the part of the population. All appeals against the ban were turned down until a final request in 2014 (Slupina 2021, 187–94). Apart from Russia in 2017, Tajikistan is the sole former Soviet Republic that has banned the organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses after legally registering it.

In the meantime, on 26 March 2009, President Rahmon signed a new law on religion, which became effective a few days later, on 1 April. This law breaks international human rights standards because it explicitly makes the exercise of freedom of religion or belief illegal without state permission.

All legal channels being closed in Tajikistan itself, Jehovah’s Witnesses continued their legal campaign for their right to religious freedom at the international level, especially through various UN mechanisms.

2. UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) and Tajikistan

In a landmark ruling in the case *Adyrkhayev v. Tajikistan*, Communication no. 2483/2014, 7 September 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (CCPR) concluded that Tajikistan’s 2007 ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses was unlawful (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2022b; see Introvigne 2022). The CCPR stressed that “none of the reasons” given by

Tajikistan “to justify the decision to ban” the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses are acceptable.

The CCPR noted that the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses are entirely peaceful and that there was no evidence that they had resulted in “numerous complaints,” as the government had alleged. The CCPR directed Tajikistan to reconsider the re-registration application of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and also directed Tajikistan to pay financial compensation for the violation of their rights (see also European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses 2022a).

3. Impact of the Ban on the Religious Life of Jehovah’s Witnesses: Conscientious Objection to Military Service

The banning of Jehovah’s Witnesses has had a negative impact on their young people of draft age.

Two years’ military service is compulsory for almost all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 27. Article 1 of the November 2000 Universal Military Obligation and Military Service Law includes the provision:

In accordance with the law, a citizen has the right to undergo alternative service in place of military service. The procedure for undergoing alternative service is determined by the law.

However, no law on alternative service has ever been adopted. Consequently, objectors are charged under Criminal Code Article 376, Part 2: “Refusal to perform military service duties with the purpose of evading it completely” (Corley 2021).

In 2017, Daniil Islamov was the first Jehovah’s Witness to serve a prison term as a conscientious objector to military service. He was sentenced to six months’ jail but was released after serving one year in prison, the call of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to release him having originally been ignored.

On 13 August 2019, Khujand’s Military Conscription Office summoned 19-year-old Jehovah’s Witness Jovidon Bobojonov. He replied with a written request to perform alternative civilian service but on 4 October officers took him into custody and, against his will, sent him to a military unit where he was tortured. On 1 April 2020, he was sentenced by a military court to two years in prison. He was

released after spending nine months in detention, within the framework of an amnesty declared by the president.

The latest conscientious objector to be arrested is Rustamjon Norov, a 22-year-old Jehovah's Witness from Dushanbe who had also offered to perform alternative civilian service. On 1 October 2020, he was taken "by force under a false pretext" to the District Conscription Office. On 3 October, officials sent Norov to military units in Khujand in the northern Sogd Region, and on 17 October the Military Prosecutor's Office accused him of falsifying his medical history to evade military service, which he denied. On 7 January 2021, a military court sentenced him to three and half years in a labour camp. After serving 11 months and 21 days in detention, he was released under a general amnesty on 21 September 2021 (Slupina 2021, 193).

4. Freedom of Assembly

On 4 June 2009, sixteen Jehovah's Witnesses peacefully gathered 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 both it and the participants of the gathering, and seized Bibles, as well as other religious publications. Several participants were subsequently taken 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 participants in that gathering. It was dismissed in October 2009, after it had been raised at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. However, the prosecutor later reopened the criminal case on other charges.

5. The Case of Shamil Khakimov, Sentenced to Seven years and Six Months in Prison

Shamil Khakimov is a 71-year-old widower. He was born in the small village of Koptush, in the district of Rudaki. 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. Khakimov had two children, a son and a daughter. In 1989, when his son was 12 and his daughter was seven, his wife, Olya, died from cancer. He

took care of his children and never remarried. Khakimov became one of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1994.

In February 2019, Shamil Khakimov was imprisoned for his religious activities. In September 2019, a court in the northern city of Khujand jailed him for seven years and six months for allegedly "inciting religious hatred," though the sentence was subsequently twice shortened under general amnesty.

No evidence was produced that Khakimov or the Jehovah's Witnesses community had harmed anyone, and his real "crime" seems to be that the regime considered he led Khujand's Jehovah's Witnesses.

In September 2021, while Khakimov was in prison, his son died from a heart attack. He was not allowed to attend his funeral.

During the 1990s, Khakimov developed 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. 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). He no longer has vision in his right eye, and he can barely see out of his left eye because of progressive glaucoma. On 31 October 2022, he received a certificate attesting that he is now classified as having a group two disability (Bayram 2022).

On 8 November 2022, Shamil Khakimov filed a formal petition for his release to the President of Tajikistan. Additionally, the same petition was filed with the General Prosecutor's Office, the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs, and the Ombudsman.

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

On 11 November 2022, a private complaint was filed against a trial court decision that refused to release Khakimov based on his poor health.

US Senator Marco Rubio and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom have also called for Khakimov's release (USCIRF 2022).

Turkmenistan

1. Legal Status of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Turkmenistan has a population of about 5.6 million inhabitants (as of midyear 2021), and about 89% of these are Sunni Muslims (U.S. Department of State 2022).

Jehovah's Witnesses have been present on the territory of Turkmenistan since the late 1980s. At that time, adherents mainly lived in Ashgabat, the country capital, and in the province of Lebap. So far, their religious community has been denied state registration. Hence, no overall membership figures are available (Slupina 2021, 195–200).

From Turkmenistan's declaration of independence on 27 October 1991, to the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov (1940–2006) in December 2006, Jehovah's Witnesses enjoyed some degree of religious freedom despite their lack of registration.

In 2003, after several amendments to the 1991 Religion Law, faith communities were obliged to obtain state registration before being allowed to undertake religious activities. The situation deteriorated with the enactment of the "Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Organizations" in 2013, along with amendments to the Administrative Code adopted on 1 January 2014 (Slupina 2021, 198). State authorities, in particular officers of the Ministry of National Security (KGB), started to interrogate Jehovah's Witnesses about the practice of their religion, and ordered them not to engage in any further "illegal activities." Heavy fines began to be imposed on their members for missionary activities.

Jehovah's Witnesses are still unrecognized, despite repeated applications for registration since 2008.

2. Impact of the Denial of Registration on Jehovah's Witnesses' Religious Life: Freedom of Assembly and Expression

Because of the state's refusal to register Jehovah's Witnesses, heavy fines have been imposed on adherents who were practising their faith, even in private.

Police and public officials have violently broken up religious meetings in private apartments. Several of the attendees, including children and elderly people, have been interrogated at police stations. Some were kept in custody for several days, even together with their young children. Their Bibles, religious literature, computers, and passports were confiscated. In some cases, officers seized and examined cell phones of Jehovah's Witnesses, and deleted all publications or apps attributable to their religion. They were told not to engage in any further "illegal activities" by meeting with fellow believers or sharing their beliefs.

Because some considered these sanctions unjustified and illegal, and refused to pay, bailiffs were commissioned to proceed with compulsory enforcement, including confiscation of personal belongings (Slupina 2021, 197–200).

3. Conscientious Objection to Military Service

Turkmenistan has repeatedly imprisoned young Jehovah's Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service. The government refuses to recognize the right of conscientious objection despite calls to comply with international standards.

Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 generally lasts for two years.

Between 2014 and 2017, the authorities punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms, rather than imprisonment.

From January 2018 until April 2022, courts in Turkmenistan handed down 33 known convictions of conscientious objectors, who were sentenced to jail terms (Slupina 2021, 199).

All legal channels being closed in Turkmenistan itself, Jehovah's Witnesses continued their legal campaign for the right to conscientious objection at the international level, especially through the UN Human Rights Committee.

4. UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR)

In 2015 and 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Committee (CCPR) issued ten decisions against Turkmenistan, in response to communications filed by individual Witnesses who had been prosecuted and imprisoned for conscientious objection. These decisions obligated Turkmenistan to provide alternative civilian service, outside the military sphere and not under military control (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022b).

Since then, the regime has rejected repeated United Nations calls to introduce a genuinely civilian alternative service.

In April 2017, the CCPR repeated its concern about Turkmenistan's continued failure to recognize the right to conscientious objection to compulsory military service and the repeated prosecution and imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses (quoted in United Nations Human Rights Committee 2022a).

On 11 March 2022 the CCPR published its Views on Communication No. 3272/2018, *Begenchov v. Turkmenistan*. It reiterated that

the right to conscientious objection is inherent in the rights guaranteed by article 18 (1) of the Covenant and is not subject to any justification under article 18 (3) of the Covenant (par. 3.3) (United Nations Human Rights Committee 2022a).

By the end of the year 2022, no new criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses' conscientious objectors had been handed to Prosecutor's Offices. However, on several occasions, law enforcement officers interviewed Witnesses of draft age and tried to dissuade them from abiding by their personal religious convictions about military service.

There is still no sign that Turkmenistan is planning to provide a civilian alternative for those unable to perform compulsory military service on grounds of conscience.

5. Recent Positive Developments

On 8 May 2021, Turkmenistan released from prison all sixteen Jehovah's Witnesses who had been convicted for conscientious objection to military service (U.S. Department of State 2022).

At the end of 2022, no Jehovah's Witnesses were known to be in detention.

Uzbekistan

1. Background and Legal Status of the Jehovah's Witnesses

Uzbekistan has a population of about 35 million inhabitants, according to the national government's latest statistics. Sunni Islam is the predominant religion, with Muslims representing about 96% of the population. Islam is considered to be an important element of the Uzbek national identity. The percentage of Russian Orthodox adherents has been dwindling, from 3.5% in 2019 to 2.2% in 2021 (U.S. Department of State 2022).

Jehovah's Witnesses have been carrying out their religious activity in the territory of Uzbekistan for approximately seventy years. During the Soviet era, and especially in the 1940s, the authorities deported numerous Witnesses from other republics of the USSR. These internally displaced Soviet citizens were the founders of their first religious communities.

The first known trial of two Jehovah's Witnesses dates back to the Soviet Union era, and took place in 1957 in Dzhir-Kurgan District, Surkhan Daya Region, on the border with Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. It concerned two women. The largest known trial happened in Angren city and concerned fourteen Jehovah's Witnesses.

Uzbekistan declared independence on 31 August 1991, about four months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. National Independence Day was formally proclaimed on 1 September. Islam Karimov (1938–2016), previously first secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, was the first president of independent Uzbekistan.

Official separation of state and religion, inherited from the Soviet Union, is formally inscribed in the Uzbek Constitution. Article 31 guarantees freedom of religion, and Article 29 assures unimpeded spread of one's beliefs.

The main restrictions were introduced in 1998 with the "Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations." The latter criminalized all unregistered religious activities, banned missionary activities and proselytizing, and gave the authorities the power to approve the content, production, distribution, and storage of religious publications. The law allowed religious instruction only in government-sanctioned schools; any religious schooling in private homes was banned. Religious groups were not allowed to operate outside

the areas where they were registered, and needed to obtain government approval for all religious activities not included in formal worship.

Under Karimov's rule, in 2004/2005 alone, 238 cases were documented in which Jehovah's Witnesses were beaten and imprisoned, or heavily fined, because of their religious activities. And between 2007 and 2019, 2,741 Jehovah's Witnesses were searched, fined, ill-treated, detained, and imprisoned (Slupina 2021, 220–27).

After his death in 2016, Karimov was replaced by his long-time Prime Minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

On 15 September 2020, a draft bill came before the Uzbek parliament (Supreme Assembly). This was intended to align the country with international standards, but the new Religion Law adopted in 2021 was disappointing as it retained many of the repressive features of the existing law. Article 3 identifies “illegal religious activity” as

activities without registration as a religious organization, the implementation by a religious organization of activities outside its [legally allowed] location, religious educational activities privately outside religious educational institutions.

Articles 240, 216-2 Part 1, 201 Part 2 and 216 provide for prison terms and heavy fines.

After the new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations was adopted, Jehovah's Witnesses submitted a new application to begin the registration process of communities in Tashkent and Samarkand.

2. Impact of Restrictive Measures on the Religious Life of Jehovah's Witnesses, and Advocacy at the UN: Freedom of Association

The minimum membership required to register a religious association is one hundred people. In most cities, Jehovah's Witnesses do not meet this requirement, and every attempt to increase their number through proselytism is seen as illegal, despite Article 29 of the Constitution, which protects the right to spread one's faith and make new members.

Jehovah's Witnesses have made fifty-four attempts to register local religious organizations (LRO) in various cities, yet their efforts have been repeatedly thwarted by officials.

Often, local authorities set their own standards of governance, following procedures that are neither uniform nor prescribed by law, making it impossible for Witnesses to acquire the permission and documentation needed for registration.

In 1994, Jehovah's Witnesses managed to register two communities, in Fergana and Chirchiq, but registration for the one in Fergana was cancelled in 2006.

On 31 January 2022, the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses filed a new submission on Uzbekistan with the CCPR. In all, 14 complaints have been submitted to the CCPR against court decisions that imposed fines for peaceful religious activities.

3. Access to, and Import of, Religious Literature

To be able to manifest their religious beliefs and make new members, religious communities must first be able to have access to information about their religion. In their submissions to the CCPR, Jehovah's Witnesses stressed that religious publications are censored by Uzbekistan's Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA).

4. Sharing One's Faith with Others

In 2008, three Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to four years in prison for sharing their beliefs with others.

On 29 April 2022, one of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Karshi was summoned to the police station. There, a law enforcement officer took her phone and began interrogating her. The Witness was shown a screenshot printout of the Telegram messaging chat, where she allegedly shared her beliefs. The officers said the complaint against her came from the "Virtual Reception of the President." They demanded that she write an explanatory note confirming that she sent the messages. She refused. Then the officers confiscated her phone and said an administrative case would be filed against her (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022c).

On 10 February 2022, two Jehovah's Witnesses, a married couple, were peacefully talking with sales assistants in Tashkent, and in casual conversation

spoke about the Bible. At that moment, a man approached them, introduced himself as a law-enforcement officer and asked the wife to go outside. He then began questioning the male Witness, verified his passport, and attempted to check the Witness's phone. He stated that Jehovah's Witnesses' activity is banned in Russia, and claimed the couple was engaged in missionary activity.

5. Some Positive Developments

Progress has been very limited in the last few years.

In May 2020, the official website of Jehovah's Witnesses was unblocked and became available throughout the country.

In 2019, the celebration of the Memorial of the death of Jesus-Christ was permitted to take place unhindered in the cities of Chirchiq, Fergana, Karshi and Urgench, although the Jehovah's Witnesses are not registered in cities other than Chirchiq.

6. Jehovah's Witnesses' Advocacy at the OSCE

In the conclusions of their submission to the OSCE/ ODIHR Human Dimension Meeting in September 2022 in Warsaw (European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses 2022c), Jehovah's Witnesses asked the Government of Uzbekistan to

- allow them to register local religious organizations throughout the country;
- end the censorship of religious literature;
- enforce media standards prohibiting libel and slander;
- receive an international delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tashkent, establishing regular contacts for meetings on all emerging issues;
- ensure that police and other officials do not interfere with the peaceful manifestation of their beliefs.

Conclusion

Since the independence of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, expectations of democratization and opening up to a human rights culture have progressively evaporated. Two main elements have contributed to this trend.

The three countries are former Soviet Republics, where atheism was the official ideology for some seventy years and where religions were merely tolerated in the last decade of existence of the USSR, especially when it was thought that they might be instrumentalized for foreign political purposes.

This underlying anti-religious culture still exists in their respective parliaments and governments, as well as among law enforcement administrations and agents, especially when religious groups of foreign origin are concerned. Such groups generate suspicion, as they are perceived as a possible threat to the national identity and traditions. The main instrument of repression is anchored in denial of state registration, which automatically makes it impossible to exercise the rights of freedom of association, assembly, expression, as well as the right of conscientious objection.

These three countries have an overwhelming majority Muslim population: 90% to 96%. In traditional Muslim culture, it is unacceptable to change one's religious beliefs, even when that is not forbidden by law. Therefore, domestic missionary activities by non-Muslim religions are perceived by the population as a threat to their social belonging and their national identity. Hence, converts to Jehovah's Witnesses mainly have a Russian Orthodox background.

However, despite the rigidities of the culture, a ray of hope exists. In Uzbekistan, presidential amnesties have been used several times to release Jehovah's Witnesses without the administration losing face. At this stage, only one Witness remains in prison, in Tajikistan, while over the last three decades there have been many more in Central Asia. This indicates that those countries are not deaf to complaints from the international community. The ongoing legal and diplomatic advocacy of Jehovah's Witnesses in Central Asia needs to be supported because any legal gain will potentially be beneficial to all religions in the region.

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