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TAJIKISTAN: Regime bans Ismaili home prayers, lessons for children

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

At least two Ismaili home owners in Mountainous Badakhshan were fined one month's average wage each for hosting prayer meetings in their homes. The regime banned such meetings in late 2022. Officials told elders on 14 January in Khorugh not to allow prayers in homes, that local people must remove portraits of Ismaili spiritual leader the Aga Khan, and that study at the London-based Institute of Ismaili Studies is no longer allowed. The regime also banned voluntary lessons for children based on a course from the Aga Khan Foundation.

Local administrations in the Mountainous Badakhshan Region in south-eastern Tajikistan have issued at least two summary fines on Ismaili Muslims in 2023 to punish hosting prayers in homes. The home owners were fined about one month's average wage each. Officials banned Ismaili prayers in homes in late 2022 as the regime violently suppressed peaceful protests in the region.

Officials told village elders at a 14 January 2023 meeting in the regional capital Khorugh not to allow prayers in homes and warned that those who take part would be fined. The elders were instructed to pass on this message to local people (see below).

"People met outside the elders' homes to hear the news and many were crying," an Ismaili told Forum 18. "But people are too afraid to protest. They can only pray at home on their own." Older people said it was too difficult for them to reach the only place in Mountainous Badakhshan where Ismailis can still meet for worship – their centre in Khorugh (see below).

The Ismaili branch of Shia Islam in Tajikistan is mainly found in Mountainous Badakhshan, and the community worldwide is led by the Aga Khan, considered to be a direct descendant of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

Ismaili Muslims meet for worship in centres (which also host educational and cultural events), prayer houses, or private homes. The two Ismaili centres in Tajikistan - in Khorugh and in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe – remain open, but only for prayers. Officials have banned the centres from conducting any educational or cultural activities (see below).

At the January meeting, officials also insisted that local people must remove portraits of the Ismaili spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, which hang in places of honour in homes. Officials had earlier complained of such portraits in the centre in Dushanbe. The Aga Khan has not been allowed to visit Tajikistan since 2012 – the regime rejected his attempt to visit in 2017 during his Diamond Jubilee visits to Ismaili communities in more than 10 countries (see below).

Officials also said that young Ismailis would no longer be allowed to travel to Britain for education at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. The regime has long tried to prevent people of any faith from travelling abroad for religious education (see below).

In late January 2023, the authorities in Mountainous Badakhshan Region banned voluntary lessons for secondary-school age children based on a course book published by the Aga Khan Foundation. The secret police have begun seizing copies of the Tajik-language set of course books, "Ethics and Knowledge" (see below).

The spokesperson for the Education and Science Ministry in Dushanbe told Forum 18 it had "no information" about any ban in Mountainous Badakhshan on the Ethics and Knowledge course. "We have not banned anything," he insisted (see below).

Officials at the Mountainous Badakhshan Administration put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself (see below).

No officials of the regime's State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) would discuss anything with Forum 18. An official of the regime's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office in Dushanbe said two of its officials were away on a work trip. The telephone of the Ombudsperson's Office representative in Khorugh went unanswered (see below).

On 3 August 2022, 8 days after the NSC secret police arrested Muzaffar Davlatmirov, a 59-year-old Ismaili religious leader,

Badakhshan Regional Court jailed him for 5 years for alleged "public calls for extremist activity". "Davlatmirov is not an extremist, and did not call for 'extremist' activity," a local person who knows him told Forum 18. Prisoner of conscience Davlatmirov is serving his sentence at the Labour Camp YaS 3/6 in Yavan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2812) in the south-western Khatlon Region.

The Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region (also known from Russian as Gorno-Badakhshan) has seen increasing repression by the regime since its forces killed a local resident in November 2021. As Bruce Pannier has observed on bne IntelliNews

(<https://www.intellinews.com/tajikistan-s-unprecedented-gbao-crackdown-threatens-a-centuries-old-culture-254070/?source=bne-cr> edit), the region has a history of independence from the regime and the Ismaili Aga Khan Foundation has played a large role in the region's development.

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Shamil Khakimov has again been denied urgently needed medical treatment in a specialised hospital. On 15 February, Sugd Regional Court rejected the latest appeal (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2812) from the 72-year-old prisoner of conscience to be transferred from Strict Regime Prison YaS 3/5 to a hospital. The repeated denial of medical treatment is against multiple statements by the UN Human Rights Committee, and the United Nations (UN) Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules). Khakimov is due for release on 16 May 2023, but there are fears he may die before then. He is among at least 7 prisoners of conscience known to be jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief, the others being Muslim.

An Imam who was one of the founders of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), Zubaydullo Rozik, was placed in the prison punishment cell (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2812) for providing religious education to other prisoners, which is illegal in Tajik prisons.

Stopping Ismailis gathering in homes for prayers

The Ismaili branch of Shia Islam in Tajikistan is mainly found in Mountainous Badakhshan in south-eastern Tajikistan, and are worldwide led by the Aga Khan, a direct descendent of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Ismaili centres are very important for the community, fulfilling a wide range of spiritual, educational, and cultural purposes.

Ismaili Muslims meet for worship in centres (which also host educational and cultural events), prayer houses, or private homes. As the regime violently suppressed peaceful protests (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/23/tajikistan-autonomous-region-protesters-denied-fair-trials>) in Mountainous Badakhshan from May 2022 onwards, it also closed down all Ismaili prayer houses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782) in the region and the Ismaili Education Centre (opened in 2018) in Khorugh.

The Aga Khan Foundation in the capital Dushanbe told Forum 18 in September 2022 that prayer houses in the region have been "unofficially closed" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782) since May 2022, but they have been given no official notification or reason given – including from the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) (SCRA) - for the closures or how long they will last. However, Ismaili education centres in Khujand in the northern Sugd Region, and in the capital Dushanbe are now open for prayers only. The regime has banned both centres from conducting any educational or cultural activities, which are very important for Ismaili Muslims (see below).

SCRA Deputy Chair Farrukhullo Olimzoda, Deputy Chair Khuseyn Shokirov, the Deputy Head of the section responsible for work with religious communities Saidakhmad Saidjafarov, and a Supreme Court official all refused in September and October 2022 to discuss the closures (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782) with Forum 18. Forum 18 also wrote to Supreme Court Chair Shermuhammad Shohiyon, asking what evidence-based legal grounds there are to close the Ismaili prayer houses and Education Centre. Forum 18 received no reply by 21 February 2023.

Mountainous Badakhshan regional government spokesperson Gholib Niyatbekov claimed to Forum 18 in October 2022 that no Ismaili prayer houses were closed in the region, and that the Education Centre in Khorugh was also not closed in May. "You have totally wrong information," he claimed.

Warnings, fines follow regime ban on prayer meetings in homes

Ismailis in villages in Mountainous Badakhshan used to meet in larger homes by rotation for weekly prayers on Thursday evenings or in the daytime on Fridays. In some places prayer meetings were held in homes every day, people from the region told Forum 18.

However, in late 2022 the regime banned Ismaili prayers in homes in the region. "Following the ban, officials went from door to door and warned people," an Ismaili who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 16 February 2023. "Grandparents cried, but the officials warned that anyone who complained would be imprisoned."

Regime officials told village elders at a 14 January 2023 meeting in the regional capital Khorugh not to allow prayers in homes and warned that those who take part would be fined. The elders were instructed to pass on this message to local people.

"People met outside the elders' homes to hear the news and many were crying," the Ismaili told Forum 18. "But people are too afraid to protest. They can only pray at home on their own." Older people said it was too difficult for them to reach the one place in Badakhshan where Ismailis can still meet for worship – their centre in Khorugh.

Local regime officials fined at least two Ismaili Muslims in 2023 to punish them for hosting Ismaili prayer meetings in their homes. Officials in Roshtkala fined one home owner 600 Somonis (about one month's local average wage for those in formal work) in January 2023, and another home owner in Rushon was fined in February, the Ismaili told Forum 18. It appears the fines were issued without any court hearing, the Ismaili added.

No one at the regime's State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) would discuss anything with Forum 18 between 14 and 21 February. The men who answered the phones on 14 February of First Deputy Chair Amirbeg Begnazarov and of the head of the International Department Abdugaffor Yusufov put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself. Subsequent calls to other SCRA officials went unanswered.

The man who answered the phone of Mountainous Badakhshan regional government spokesperson Gholib Niyatbekov on 13 February claimed to Forum 18 that it was a wrong number.

Officials at the Mountainous Badakhshan Administration put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 introduced itself on 21 February. The telephone of the regional representation of the regime's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office in Khorugh went unanswered the same day.

An official of the regime's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office in the capital Dushanbe refused to discuss the ban on praying in homes in Mountainous Badakhshan on 21 February. He said Mukim Ashurov (Head of its Civil and Political Rights Department) and Rachabmo Habibulozoda (Head of its Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Department) were both away on a work trip.

(The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions accredits Tajikistan's Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office only with B status because of its failure to accord with the Paris Principles, which require such institutions to be independent of government.)

Regime bans Aga Khan portraits in homes

At the 14 January meeting in Khorugh, officials insisted to local elders that people must remove portraits of the Ismaili spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, which hang in places of honour in many homes. Elders were required to pass on such instructions to people in their communities. Officials instead handed out portraits of President Emomali Rahmon.

The regime's hostility to the Ismaili community possibly stems from its suspicion that Ismailis respect the Aga Khan more than Rahmon, who has ruled the country since 1992 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) without facing a free and fair election (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan>). Regime officials formally refer to Rahmon as the "Founder of Peace and National Unity, Leader of the Nation".

Regime officials had earlier complained of portraits of the Aga Khan in the Centre in Dushanbe. In 2019 the SCRA wrote to the Aga Khan Foundation and the Ismaili Education Centre (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782) in Dushanbe, stating: "We are concerned that colourful posters of Aga Khan around the buildings of prayer houses with slogans such as 'Welcome Our Imam', 'Happy Diamond Anniversary', 'We Love Our Imam' can be interpreted as a preference for the [Shia Muslim] Ismaili faith over the [state-controlled (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625)] Sunni faith, and for the Aga Khan over the Leader of the Nation [Emomali Rahmon]."

The Aga Khan first visited Badakhshan in May 1995 and tens of thousands of Ismailis travelled from all parts of Badakhshan to meet him. Many local Ismailis commemorate his first visit each 28 May. However, the regime has not allowed the Aga Khan to visit Tajikistan since April 2012. It rejected his attempt to visit in 2017 during his Diamond Jubilee tour of Ismaili communities which took him to more than 10 countries.

Regime bans studies at Ismaili Institute in London

At the 14 January 2023 meeting in Khorugh, officials also told the elders that young Ismailis would no longer be allowed to travel to Britain for education at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London. For Ismaili Muslims worldwide the IIS is one of their most important educational institutions and libraries.

The regime has in recent years banned people of all beliefs from receiving religious education (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) in Tajikistan and abroad.

Ismaili-based Ethics and Knowledge course banned from schools

Since the mid-2000s, teachers in Mountainous Badakhshan have taught an Ethics and Knowledge course tailored to Ismaili children. At first the classes were held in school on a voluntary basis after normal lessons had finished. The course used the Tajik-language books, "Ethics and Knowledge", produced by Ismaili organisations.

The books were published in Tajik and distributed with the verbal approval of the Education and Science Ministry.

The illustrated books – which are aimed at children from the age of 7 to 14 – cover contemporary ethics, and the history of Islam and the Ismaili community.

Officials banned the teaching of the Ismaili-based Ethics and Knowledge course in schools in early 2021. Officials held a meeting at Badakhshan Administration on 2 February 2021, led by the then head of the region Yodgor Fayzov.

"With the passage of time," the Badakhshan Administration noted the same day, "taking into account the prevalence of secular education in state educational institutions and the increase in the number of non-Ismaili children in schools of the region, especially in the city of Khorugh, lack of time, class hours and classrooms, and other religious problems of today's world, the teaching of this lesson has been temporarily suspended."

On 27 January 2021, an online petition had been launched protesting against the ban. It called for the state to give permission for lessons in the course to be conducted in Ismaili prayer houses in Badakhshan. It cited Article 8, Part 5 of the Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625), which states that religious education is allowed for children between the ages of 7 and 18 in non-school hours with the written permission of parents. However, this has not been a reality.

The petition also noted freedom of religion or belief guarantees in Tajikistan's Constitution, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Minorities/Booklet_Minorities_English.pdf).

Ban on voluntary Ethics and Knowledge classes, books seized

However, teaching of the Ethics and Knowledge course continued beyond January 2021 in Mountainous Badakhshan outside the school curriculum, often in Ismaili prayer houses. This was done with only verbal permission, not written permission, exiled journalist Anora Sarkorova told Forum 18.

In late January 2023 officials halted teaching of the Ethics and Knowledge course in Mountainous Badakhshan, Sarkorova added. National Security Committee (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) (NSC) secret police officers began seizing copies of "Ethics and Knowledge", with 5,000 being seized in the regional capital Khorugh in the first few days of the campaign. The NSC secret police has demanded that others who have copies of the book hand them in, Sarkorova noted.

In Khorugh, the NSC secret police has summoned teachers daily for interrogation and threatened them with criminal prosecution, Pamir Daily News noted on 8 February.

"These books are completely dedicated to the education of the individual in a contemporary spirit," one Khorugh teacher told Pamir Daily News, "but with the knowledge of religious and cultural values. There is in them no religious fanaticism which could be banned in law. Now we teachers, who taught children on a voluntary basis, are being accused of breaking the law. At this rate, not a single teacher will be left here."

Novruz, the spokesperson for the Education and Science Ministry in Dushanbe, insisted that his ministry had not banned such courses and has "no information" about any such ban. "The Education Ministry publishes textbooks and teachers teach from these textbooks," he told Forum 18 on 21 February. "We didn't ban anything."

The Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB), which worked with the Education and Science Ministry on the Ethics and Knowledge course, was reportedly closed down in early February, Pamir Daily News said.

Dushanbe bookshops reopen in 2023 – with less religious literature

On 2 September 2022, the State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) announced that it had in late August and early September closed all Islamic bookshops in Dushanbe as well as some publishers which printed Islamic literature. SCRA Deputy Chair Farrukhullo Olimzoda, Deputy Chair Khuseyn Shokirov, and the Deputy Head of the section responsible for work with religious communities Saidakhmad Saidjafarov all refused to discuss the closures (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2785) with Forum 18.

SCRA Deputy Chair Abdurakhmon Vahhobzoda told journalists on 3 February 2023 that the Dushanbe religious bookshops had

been closed five months earlier because of the illegal import and sale of religious books, their lack of an "expert" analysis (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625) from the SCRA, as well as alleged complaints from authors that the books had been pirated.

SCRA Chair Sulaymon Davlatzoda added that although the SCRA had given permission to some publishers to produce no more than 5,000 copies of a particular book, "in fact they published a lot more of them". (When the SCRA gives permission to publish or import a religious book, it specifies the number of copies for which it is giving permission.)

In early 2023 the regime allowed Islamic bookshops next to Dushanbe's Central Mosque to reopen, but with a restricted supply of religious books. "In bookshops the amount of religious literature has diminished, but now a wide range of namaz prayer mats and beads have appeared there," Radio Free Europe's Tajik Service noted on 3 February.

"We were allowed to reopen our shops," one of the shop owners told Radio Free Europe, "but the quantity of religious literature is sharply limited. Buyers are interested in the Holy Koran and other religious books, but when they find out that they are not on sale, they get upset and go home with empty hands." (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=31>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY