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## TAJIKISTAN: Denial of "qualified medical care" led to Ismaili leader's prison death?

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

*Seriously ill prisoner of conscience Muzaffar Davlatmirov, a leading Ismaili Muslim khalifa (cleric) from Mountainous Badakhshan, and his relatives repeatedly called for his transfer from prison to hospital. Prison authorities repeatedly denied this, even when his health deteriorated from May. Officials promised Davlatmirov only to "sort things out later". The 61-year-old died in the labour camp at Yavan in Khatlon Region on 26 June. Officials at the Prisons Department of the Justice Ministry's Department for the Execution of Criminal Punishments did not answer the phone.*

Nearly three years into his five-year prison sentence, prisoner of conscience Muzaffar Davlatmirov, a leading Ismaili Muslim khalifa (cleric) from Mountainous Badakhshan, has died in prison. He died of poor health in the labour camp at Yavan in Khatlon Region on 26 June after prison authorities repeatedly rejected calls for him to be transferred to hospital, exiled media noted. The 61-year-old had been suffering from diabetes and other complaints.

"Davlatmirov was widely known and respected by the local Ismaili people," independent journalist Anora Sarkorova told Forum 18 after he was imprisoned in 2022 (see below).

Davlatmirov's health appears to have severely worsened from May 2025. "His condition worsened in several areas at the same time: high blood sugar, exacerbation of asthma, difficulty breathing and persistent high blood pressure," exile news outlet Pamir Inside noted on 27 June, citing informed sources. Despite repeated appeals to the prison administration for him to be hospitalised, officials promised Davlatmirov only to "sort things out later". Prison authorities did not provide "qualified medical care", Pamir Inside added (see below).

Prison officials have a history of refusing urgent medical care to prisoners of conscience. Prisons are run by the Justice Ministry. Officials at the Prisons Department of the Justice Ministry's Department for the Execution of Criminal Punishments did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called (see below).

Similarly, officials of the Justice Ministry's Department for the Execution of Criminal Punishments and Yavan Prison did not return calls from the Tajik Service of Radio Liberty (see below).

Telephones at the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office in Dushanbe, as well as the regional branches in Khatlon Region (where Yavan prison is located) and Badakhshan Region (where Davlatmirov was from), went unanswered each time Forum 18 called (see below).

Telephones at the regime's State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) in Dushanbe went unanswered whenever Forum 18 called (see below).

Amid tight regime censorship, news outlets in Tajikistan appear to have made no mention of Davlatmirov's death (see below).

Regime's tight control of Ismaili Muslim community

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

The regime keeps tight control over all exercise of freedom of religion or belief ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2880](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880)), including by the Ismaili Muslim community.

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 in Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region and in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe – remain open, but only for prayers. Officials have banned the centres from conducting any educational or cultural activities. Officials have also banned Ismailis from holding prayer meetings in homes.

Officials announced in 2023 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.

At a January 2023 meeting in Khorugh, officials insisted that local people must remove portraits ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2880](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880)) 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 IV, the 49th hereditary imam and spiritual leader of the world's Ismaili Shia Muslims, was not allowed to visit Tajikistan after 2012 – the regime rejected his attempt to visit in 2017 during his Diamond Jubilee visits to Ismaili communities in more than 10 countries. Authorities both in Khorugh and in Dushanbe obstructed ceremonies in February 2025 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2967](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2967)) related to the Aga Khan IV's death and the appointment of his son as the Aga Khan V, the 50th imam.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Nazila Ghanea noted the authorities' violations of the rights to freedom of religion or belief of Ismailis and tried to find out more during her April 2023 visit to Tajikistan. She visited Mountainous Badakhshan, but was obstructed in her attempts.

"As the Special Rapporteur's visit request had clearly indicated her strong interest in visiting that Province, she very much regrets that the authorities did not facilitate official meetings and she was thus unable to meet the authorities there," Ghanea noted in her subsequent report, issued on 18 January 2024 (A/HRC/55/47/Add.1 (<https://docs.un.org/A/HRC/55/47/ADD.1>)). "While her delegation reached out to a range of religious and belief communities and faith-based actors in the Province, it was met with widespread reluctance to speak for fear of reprisals."

Arrested, jailed in 2022 for leading funerals?

On 26 July 2022 the National Security Committee (NSC) secret police arrested the Ismaili khalifa (religious leader) Muzaffar Vafonazarovich Davlatmirov (born 6 July 1963) in Khorugh. Just eight days later, on 3 August, Badakhshan Regional Court handed him a five-year general regime prison sentence ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2782](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782)) under Criminal Code Article 307-1 ("Public calls for extremist activity"), Part 2 ("committed using the mass media or the internet"). The regime has used this article to target a variety of Muslims.

Judge Abdukhanon Nazarzoda, Chair of Badakhshan Regional Court, refused to explain to Forum 18 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2782](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782)) in October 2022 why his court jailed prisoner of conscience Davlatmirov. "I do not remember," Nazarzoda claimed, "the Court has had so many cases recently that I cannot remember all the details." He also refused to explain why Davlatmirov was arrested on 26 July and swiftly jailed on 4 August.

Police Major Azamat Oshurmamadov, who commanded "anti-terrorism" police operations in the region, refused to tell Forum 18 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2782](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782)) in October 2022 what exactly Davlatmirov did that led to his jailing. "I do not know of such a person or his arrest," he claimed. When Forum 18 pointed out that Major Oshurmamadov's colleagues in the regional government and judiciary know who Davlatmirov is and that he had been jailed, Oshurmamadov put the phone down.

Regional government spokesperson Gholib Niyatbekov also refused in October 2022 to state what exactly Davlatmirov did that led to the five-year jail term.

"Muzaffar tried to appeal, but they [the court] didn't accept it," independent journalist Anora Sarkorova told Forum 18.

"Davlatmirov is not an extremist, and did not call for 'extremist' activity," a local person who knew him told Forum 18 in October 2022 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2782](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782)).

"Davlatmirov was widely known and respected by the local Ismaili people," independent journalist Anora Sarkorova told Forum 18 in October 2022 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2782](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782)). She noted that he had criticised the regime's religious policies, and argued for the preservation of local Pamiri traditions. Davlatmirov also, she stated, criticised the regime's violent suppression in May 2022 of peaceful protests. The suppression of protest is claimed by the regime to be an "anti-terrorism operation".

Sarkorova commented that the regime did not like the fact that Davlatmirov was respected in the region, and that he could influence people. She thought it was possible that prisoner of conscience Davlatmirov was jailed because he said the janaza (funeral) prayers at the funerals in mid-2022 of three local informal leaders - Mahmadoqir Mahmadoqirov, Zoir Rajabov, and Khursand Mazoriev. The three were killed during the regime's violent suppression of peaceful protests in the region. The NSC secret police had banned

religious leaders from taking part in their funerals.

Nearly 3 years in Yavan prison

In August 2022, after prisoner of conscience Muzaffar Davlatmirov was sentenced, the Justice Ministry's Department for the Execution of Criminal Punishments sent him to serve his sentence in General Regime Prison YaS 3/6 in Yavan in the south-western Khatlon Region. For months afterwards prisoner of conscience Davlatmirov's relatives and friends were not told where he was held ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2792](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2792)).

The regime has held in Prison YaS 3/6 many prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief, including:

- Protestant Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2298](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2298)), until his release in 2019;
- Journalist and Muslim Daler Sharipov ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2568](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2568)), until his release in 2021;
- Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Rustamjon Norov ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2629](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2629)), until his release in 2021.

"Prisoners in Yavan are very cold," independent journalist Anora Sarkorova (who visited the prison in 2020) told Forum 18 in February 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2812](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2812)). "They ask their relatives to send blankets and mattresses." She said the food served up to prisoners is inedible. "Relatives buy everything, from food to toilet paper. Prisoners club together to buy kettles." Prisoners are allowed to call their relatives, but must speak in Tajik so that a warder sitting next to them can understand what they are saying.

Death in prison follows denial of "qualified medical care"?

Ismaili Muslim prisoner of conscience Muzaffar Davlatmirov died of ill health in General Regime Prison YaS 3/6 in Yavan on 26 June, exiled news outlet Pamir Inside and Radio Liberty's Tajik Service noted the following day. The 61-year-old had been suffering from diabetes and other conditions for some time. Both he and relatives had requested his transfer to hospital several times since his detention in Yavan.

Davlatmirov's health appears to have severely worsened from May. "His condition worsened in several areas at the same time: high blood sugar, exacerbation of asthma, difficulty breathing and persistent high blood pressure," Pamir Inside noted on 27 June (<https://t.me/pamirinside/4347>), citing informed sources. Despite repeated appeals to the prison administration for him to be hospitalised, officials promised Davlatmirov only to "sort things out later". Prison authorities did not provide qualified medical care, Pamir Inside added.

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules, A/C.3/70/L.3 ([https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E\\_ebook.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf))) are explicit about the obligation of prison administrations to tackle prisoners' health concerns appropriately.

"All prisons shall ensure prompt access to medical attention in urgent cases," Rule 27 notes. "Prisoners who require specialized treatment or surgery shall be transferred to specialized institutions or to civil hospitals. Where a prison service has its own hospital facilities, they shall be adequately staffed and equipped to provide prisoners referred to them with appropriate treatment and care."

Rule 27 adds: "Clinical decisions may only be taken by the responsible health-care professionals and may not be overruled or ignored by non-medical prison staff."

Both the UN Human Rights Committee and the UN Committee against Torture have both called for Tajikistan to implement the Mandela Rules ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2643](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2643)).

In 2022 and 2023, officials from Strict Regime Prison YaS 3/5 in Khujand repeatedly refused to transfer to hospital ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2812](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2812)) Jehovah's Witness prisoner of conscience Shamil Khakimov for urgently-needed specialised medical care. The then 72-year-old had multiple medical conditions, including signs of gangrene in his legs, serious eyesight problems, and frequent severe headaches. He was freed in May 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2840](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2840)).

Prisons are run by the Justice Ministry. Officials at the Prisons Department of the Justice Ministry's Department for the Execution of Criminal Punishments did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called on 30 June.

Similarly, officials of the Justice Ministry's Department for the Execution of Criminal Punishments and Yavan Prison did not return calls from the Tajik Service of Radio Liberty (<https://www.ozodi.org/a/khalifa-muzaffar-ruhonii-shinokhtai-badakhshon-dar-zindon-favtidaast/33456509.html>).

Telephones at the regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office in Dushanbe, as well as the regional branches in Khatlon Region (where Yavan prison is located) and Badakhshan Region (where Davlatmirov was from), went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 30 June.

The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) has found that the Human Rights Ombudsperson does not comply with the Paris Principles (<https://ganhri.org/accreditation/>) for national human rights institutions, as among other problems it is not independent of the regime.

Telephones at the regime's State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2880](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880)) (SCRA) in Dushanbe went unanswered whenever Forum 18 called on 30 June.

Security forces obstruct transport of body for burial

Yavan prison released Muzaffar Davlatmirov's body to relatives for his burial in his home town near Khorugh in Mountainous Badakhshan. They began the 575 km (360 mile) journey by road to Khorugh, which can take up to 9 hours' driving in summer. However, security forces stopped the car with Davlatmirov's body at night near Shuroobod, about four hours' drive from Yavan. The body remained in the morgue until the morning, when it was handed back to relatives.

Officials gave no explanation for the delay. However, according to sources, the detention could have been related to President Emomali Rahmon's visit to Khorugh, which ended on 28 June. "The special services were probably afraid of possible unrest," Pamir Inside noted (<https://t.me/pamirinside/4358>).

Relatives buried Davlatmirov in his home village of Tem near Khorugh on 28 June, journalist Anora Sarkorova told Forum 18 on 30 June.

News blackout on Davlatmirov's death?

News outlets in Tajikistan appear to have made no mention of Davlatmirov's death.

The monitoring group Reporters Without Borders put Tajikistan at 153rd place out of 180 countries it examined in 2025 for its restrictions on the press. "The government closely monitors content broadcast on the radio, television and the Internet, and access to official information is extremely limited for independent media," it noted (<https://rsf.org/en/country/tajikistan>). "Journalists who do not resort to self-censorship are harassed by the intelligence services and are targets of intimidation and blackmail." (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=2880](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2880))

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](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351))

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