

Followers of this religious community liable for military service continue to go to jail.

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In Tajikistan, persecution of followers of the Jehovah's Witnesses religious organization, who, because of their religious beliefs, refuse to serve in the army, continues. Lawyers believe that the solution to this problem could be the existence of a law on alternative civil service.

In early April, news service Radio Ozodi reported that a military court in Dushanbe sentenced **Jovidon Bobojonov**, a 20-year-old follower of the Jehovah's Witnesses religious organization, to two years in prison for refusing to serve in the army.



Jovidon Bobojonov, Photo: ozodi.org

Bobojonov, referring to his religious beliefs, refused to put on military uniform and take up arms.

From the published information it follows that the young man was willing to complete an alternative civil service, but in Tajikistan such is not provided for by the law.

Consequently, all those who refuse to undergo the mandatory military service are subject to Article 376 ("Evasion from military service by self-injury or otherwise") of the Criminal Code of the country.

This is not the first similar case in the country

In 2017, another follower of this religious community, 18-year-old Daniil Islomov was convicted for a similar reason but for six months. He was also denied the right for alternative civil service.

Religious organization "Jehovah's Witnesses" was officially registered in Tajikistan in 1997.

However, since 2008, the activities of the organization were suspended in the country based on the decision of the military court of Dushanbe city.

Numerous attempts by Jehovah's Witnesses to challenge this decision were unsuccessful.

However, unlike many prohibited extremist and terrorist organizations in Tajikistan, it is not prohibited by law to study and follow the ideas of Jehovah's Witnesses.

International political and human rights organizations have been frequently criticizing the Tajik authorities for obstructing the activities of this political organization.

At the same time, a competent Tajik law enforcement official on an anonymous basis, complained to CABAR.asia that the followers of Jehovah's Witnesses are continuing to promote the ideas of refusing military service and a ban on blood transfusion among the population.

"The law of the country states that every person of military age should serve in the armed forces. Ignoring the law is a crime" - said the law enforcement official.

Nonetheless, the followers of Jehovah's Witnesses continue to disseminate information about the organization on the streets of cities, including Dushanbe. Applications in smartphones have replaced the hard copy literature in their hands.

"We are already used to it. For example in Russia the followers of Jehovah's Witnesses were declared extremists. Our men were detained here several times and following several meetings and conversations were released" - said Nodira, one of the followers of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Last fall, Shamil Khakimov, a follower of this organization was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison. He was indicted of inciting racial, national and religious hatred. Khakimov himself did not plead guilty, calling the decision unfair.

According to Nodira, the followers of Jehovah's Witnesses are constantly being pressured by their relatives as they have a negative attitude towards their religious choice. The lack of a



Court in Khujand in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses follower, Shamil Khakimov. Photo: asiaplus.tj

formal registration does not allow them to hold meetings and creates many other problems.

"We are amused by such an attitude of the authorities when they do not allow us to openly conduct religious events" - continues the interlocutress of CABAR.asia. - Why are Witnesses dangerous? Is there any message somewhere that the Witnesses carried out a terrorist attack? There is no such thing. This is because our ideology forbids any violent acts".

International human rights organizations have constantly called on Tajik authorities to lift the ban on the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses pointing out that "the State party should reverse its discriminatory refusal to register certain religious denominations."

According to OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), because the Jehovah's Witnesses are not registered, they are harassed by the authorities for their religious [beliefs](#).

The report of the Bureau states that the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) in Dushanbe repeatedly called on Jehovah's witnesses for interrogation and pressured them to sign "self-incriminating statements."

In this regard, OSCE recommends Tajikistan to register Jehovah's Witnesses as a local religious organization and give permission for the import and use of religious literature.

"Recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service and provide alternative civil service so that Jehovah's Witnesses can serve their country with a clear conscience," the OSCE/ODIHR statement said.

According to **Dilshod Juraev**, representative of the International Commission of Jurists, the right to conscientious objection to military service is considered the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

"This is implied in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is clearly formulated by the Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No.22 on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Tajikistan is a party" - says Juraev.

The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan "On Universal Military Duty and Military Service" adopted in 2000 states that "a citizen, instead of performing military service, has the right to perform an alternative service."

There are provisions in the country's Criminal Code for punishment of evasion of military as well as alternative service. Explicitly in various laws of Tajikistan it is mentioned about alternative service. However, there is no law itself that would regulate the relations in the field of alternative civil service.

"The duty to use firearms may not only contradict religious beliefs, but also his civic position, his commitments to the ideas of pacifism," - continues lawyer Dilshod Juraev. - Jehovah's Witnesses are opponents of military service and everyone is aware of that. But at the same time they are ready to complete an alternative civil service. However, there are no legal grounds for passing it yet. The absence of a law on alternative civil service deprives some people of fulfilling the duty to their country in accordance with their beliefs and convictions, performing socially useful activities."

The need to adopt a law on alternative civil service has been continually discussed in the country. The media reported that back in 2017, Minister of Defense Sherali Mirzo, presenting a draft law "On Military Duty and Military Service" to the parliament, said that the Ministry of Defense had prepared a draft law on alternative military service and submitted it to the government. However as the minister then stated, large financial resources are needed for its implementation. Since then the issue has not moved forward.

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