

The fate of former star of Tajik football accused of extremism in his homeland is in hand of Belarusian authorities. He will either live a quiet life in the West, or be arrested and tortured in Tajikistan.

[На русском](#)

An uneasy travel of Tursunov and his family for political asylum to the European Union has suddenly stopped right beside its doors - upon arrival to the Minsk airport, Parviz has been detained by border service officers because in November 2016 in Tajikistan he was charged with “organising the extremist organisation’s activity” and issued an international arrest warrant.

Tursunov came into focus of Tajik officials and media in 2011, when he refused in public to shave his “long” beard as the authorities requested and was forced to terminate his career in football. In the same year, he left with his family for the UAE.

According to Belarus-based Human Constanta human rights organisation, which protects Tursunov, in late 2016 he applied to the Tajik embassy in the UAE for a police clearance to get permanent residence and found out that in November 2016 he was charged in Tajikistan. The law enforcement bodies of the republic haven’t reported the reason for the initiation of the criminal case yet.

The Tajik media write that Parviz Tursunov is the follower of Salafism, a branch of Islam, which is recognised as the extremist one in Tajikistan due to its conservative interpretation of religion. The leadership of Tajikistan, as well as other governments of Central Asian states, approves of Hanafi school of Islam only, as the closest to the culture of regional population.

Tursunov’s relatives don’t say openly whether he was a Salafi or not. They only note that he has never done anything illegal and never acted against the government.

“If you are a pious Muslim, you are definitely a terrorist. This is the idea we have in Tajikistan, an Islamic country,” the Belarusian website Naviny.by [cited](#) an unnamed relative of Tursunov.

Tajikistan has never approved of Salafis; ten years ago the campaign and fight against them got even harder. Media outlets often publish news about imprisonments of citizens charged with their adherence to Salafism. Among them are physicians, rural people, religious figures, and even officers of force authorities.

“In 2017, at least 20 people were sentenced to 5-5.5 years only for their adherence to



Parviz Tursunov. Photo: muslim-info.com

Salafism. In December 2017, three persons from Khujand (Mukhiddin Mirzoyev, Khairullo Ismoilov, and Khasan Djabbarov) were sentenced to five years in prison for praying like Salafis; three more people were sentenced to six months in prison for not reporting the “unapproved way” of praying of the defendants to the authorities,” according to the annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Such rigid approach of the authorities and doubts in the reality of the threat raise questions in local and international human rights activists, and a wide campaign on prevention of Parviz Tursunov’s extradition to Tajikistan has been launched.

“The Tajik law enforcement system and torture are synonyms,” says Marat Mamadshoyev

On October 11, such international human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch (HRW), Norwegian Helsinki Committee and Association of Migrants in Central Asia published their joint statement condemning “politically motivated charge” against Tursunov and calling on the Belarusian authorities not to extradite him to Dushanbe.

“Tajikistan severely restricts religious freedom, regulating religious worship, dress, and [religious] education, and [the authorities] imprisons numerous people on vague charges of religious extremism,” as was [noted](#) in the joint statement by international human rights organisations.

Europe full of Tajik “extremists”

It wasn’t by accident that Tursunov and his family arrived at Belarus to cross its western border and ask for political asylum in Poland. After 2010, a new wave of tightened religious policies has occurred; in 2014, the critics of the regime were under pressure and hundreds of nationals of Tajikistan found shelter in Poland and other European Union countries, as well as in the USA.

“I was also accused of my affiliation to Salafism, terrorism, but do I look like them?” a Tajik activist **Shabnam Khudoidodova**, dressed like a European, asked.

Shabnam Khudoidodova fled to Poland after her previous opposition activity against the Tajik government. According to her, dozens of ethnic Tajiks stay in this and other European countries because in their homeland they have been charged with extremism and distribution of extremist information, yet in real life they are far from religion and these accusations are not relevant to them.

“They [Tajik officials] just use the word Salafism. I haven’t seen such people among [Tajik] refugees. I just hope I won’t see them in future,” she said to IWPR.

Belarus and Tajikistan are bound by the [CIS Convention](#) on legal assistance, which regulates the extradition of detained citizens. The document specifies that the state may refuse to extradite a person if he/she is persecuted for their religion or political beliefs, yet Belarus is often criticised for violation of human rights.

Nasta Loiko, a human rights defender of Human Constanta, said to IWPR:

“To suspend the process of extradition through the administration of pre-trial detention centre in Minsk, Parviz has recently filed a petition to get a refugee status in Belarus. We hope that even if Belarus refuses to provide him international protection, there will be other countries that will do so.”

“Belarus, despite the ban on extradition to countries where people can face torture or death penalty, usually doesn’t consider such circumstances and extradite people on formal grounds. I hope this is not going to happen with Parviz,” she added.

The Interior Ministry of Tajikistan has stated it submitted documents for the extradition of Parviz Tursunov and assured the trial would be fair.

“The Tajik law enforcement system and torture are a kind of synonyms,” said political analyst **Marat Mamadshoyev**, who was forced to leave Tajikistan due to his journalist activity. “A person who is caught by the system is threatened with torture. They [law enforcement authorities] make no secret of it. The on-going fight against torture [in the country] is a show-off.”

All to fight against terrorism and extremism

Tajikistan has never been a model country in terms of religious freedom, but in recent years the authorities have put the religious sphere under strict control followed by a series of restrictions.



Shabnam Khudoidodova calling for release of Parviz Tursunov. Photo: Facebook personal account

President Emomali Rakhmon has spoken against religious attributes in clothing, wearing long beards and so-called non-traditional religious movements many times. After his speeches, the country conducted raids to identify all those who don't comply with the president's description of appearance; tacit recommendations regarding clothing and long beards are still in force.

The phrase “fight against terrorism and extremism” has become a mantra for Tajik authorities, and dozens of people have been imprisoned or accused under this campaign. Yet Dushanbe, as it strengthens cooperation with rich states of the Persian Gulf, where, vice versa, Salafism is ideologically supported, has somehow toned down its rhetoric against the followers of Salafism in recent years. This August, the authorities of Tajikistan, following the legislative changes, reported about the former Salafis who were pardoned because they repented and receded from their religious views.



Welcoming the delegations of businessmen from Saudi Arabia in Khujand (large industrial city in the north of Tajikistan). Photo: news.tj

“In some cases, they just follow their plan to convict a certain number of terrorists and extremists,” analyst Mamadshoyev said.

According to him, not all convicted and defendants pose a threat declared by the authorities: some are just interested in various movements and don't plot any crimes against

the public and the state.

“Therefore, every case must be considered individually. Those who really pose a threat amount to 5-10 per cent [out of total number of convicted] at most. Ninety per cent of imprisoned people are those who were imprisoned under the plan, or those who were undesirables,” Mamadshoyev said.

A Dushanbe-based political analyst **Marufjon Abdujabborov** disagrees with him. In his opinion, the threat posed by extremism and terrorism in Tajikistan is not a far-fetched issue; those who act underground pose much threat.

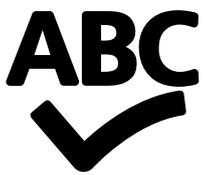
In late 2016, Tajikistan adopted a special strategy on fighting terrorism and extremism until 2020. Tajikistan has a long southern border with Afghanistan with on-going civil war, in whose provinces a part of the Islamic State terrorist group along with the natives of Central Asian states have found shelter. According to the political analyst, they pose a serious threat not only to Tajikistan, but also to the whole region.



Political analyst Marufjon Abdujabborov. Photo: Facebook personal account

“I don’t think Tajikistan arrests and interrogates people for no reason, without any proofs of their participation in extremist crimes. One suspect can be under police supervision and surveillance for several months (if not years),” Marufjon Abdujabborov.

“I am against innocent person becoming a victim of physical abuse without any unjustified suggestion of their possible involvement in extremism. On the other hand, no extremist will admit guilt through soft words and kindness,” he said.



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