

Minority are recognised by the state but face discrimination from ordinary citizens.

### На русском

Mahnoz Jonmahmadova, now 33, was born into a Bahai family but only started practicing her faith as a teenager.

“At the age of 15, I came to the understanding that this religion, with all its excellent teachings, was very dear to me and therefore I embraced the Bahá’í faith,” she said.

There are estimated to be about 1,000 followers of the Bahai religion in Tajikistan, an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country. The Bahai are registered as a faith community with the government’s committee on religious affairs and are allowed to worship freely.

But although the state respects their religious freedoms, deteriorating levels of tolerance in Tajik society means that many Bahai say they face discrimination from ordinary citizens.

Jonmahmadova said that not everyone around her was supportive about her move back towards her religion.

“There were people who respected my decision, but there were also those who treated me with intolerance and prejudice because I was a Bahá’í,” she continued. “People’s reactions were different, some asked kindly about the features of the Bahá’í faith, but some were even afraid to say hello to me.”

Islam does not recognize the Bahai faith, which is why the community is persecuted in Iran and some other Muslim countries.

In Tajikistan, there are those who view being Bahai as incompatible with Tajik nationality. Safar Kayumov, a 33-year-old resident of the Tajik capital, said he knew nothing about the Bahai faith and had no interest in learning.

“We are a Muslim country, why do we need other religions? Bahá’ís, Christians... We don’t. Let them live and practice their religions in their own societies.”

The Bahai religion was established by Mírzá Husayn `Alí Núrí, known as Bahauallah, in 1863, in what is now present-day Iran. Adherents worldwide number between five and seven million and consider Bahauallah to be a prophet.

Tajikistan’s first Bahai community was established in the late nineteenth century, situated mainly in Samarkand, Bukhara, Istaravshan, Tashkent, Khujand and Dushanbe.

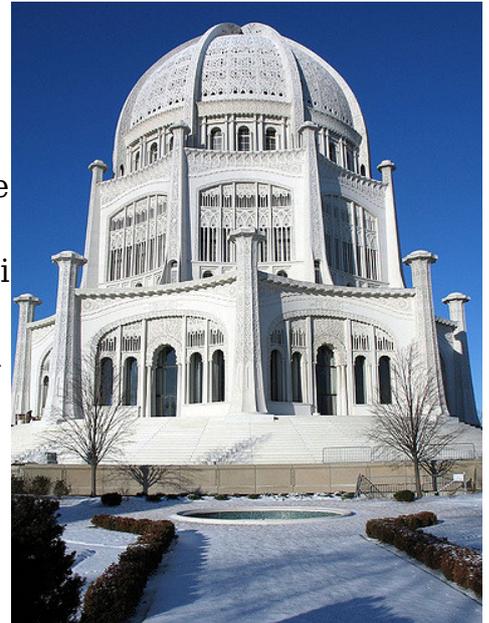


Image: kudzuplanet/Flickr



*The Bahai community in Tajikistan. Image: bahai.org*

After the suppression of the Iranian revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century, more Bahai fled to Central Asia.

During the Soviet era, when the state promoted atheism, the Bahai like other faith communities came under pressure from the authorities.

Then, after Tajikistan proclaimed its independence, Bahai communities were officially registered in Dushanbe and Khujand.

Mehridin Holmurzoev, the secretary of Tajikistan's Bahá'í community, said that there were no exact figures as to the numbers of his co-religionists in Tajikistan.

Although the authorities treated the community with respect, he agreed that discrimination still existed.

Holmurzoev said that this was linked with Iran's unfair treatment of the Bahai in their own country. There are around 300,000 Bahá'ís in Iran, the country where the religion first developed, and they face constant persecution.

Although Tajikistan is Sunni and Iran predominately Shia, the two countries have close cultural ties.

This had led to misconceptions about the Bahai in Tajikistan, too.

"In the past, there were cases when, due to the hostility of the Iranian embassy, some individuals threatened the life of Bahá'ís in Tajikistan and harmed the community in many ways, but now with the help of law enforcement agencies, this problem has been solved and there are no longer any such threats," Holmurzoev said.

In 2001, two Bahai men were killed in separate incidents in the Tajik capital in murders that the authorities found to be motivated by religious hatred.

However, religious expert Faridun Hodizoda said that Tajik society was becoming less open-minded as a result of the mounting influence of more radical Sunni Muslim movements from

the Arab world. These Islamist movements had grown ever since independence, and these were far less accepting of difference than the traditional Hanafi stream of Tajik Islam. “Several times Bahá’ís have even complained about it,” he said. “During Ramadan, if people see someone drinking water on the street, they shout ‘ruzakhur’ [Tajik for violater’]. This is a sign that the level of tolerance in Tajik society has decreased.”



*Isfandiyor Gulomov. Image: RFE/RL*

Isfandiyor Gulomov, a well-known Tajik actor who converted to the Baha faith, also said that those who knew about his spiritual journey found it hard to accept.

Describing a recent incident, he said, “I was asked, how could I convert to another religion and no longer recognise that Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet? I told them that if they knew what the Prophet Bahá’u’lláh says [positively] about the Prophet Muhammad, they would not ask that.

“But people do not know anything about this religion,” he continued. “They judge something they do not understand and do not know.”



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