

Tajik Children Face Ban From Places of Worship

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DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Tajikistan has taken the first step toward banning children and adolescents from worshipping in mosques and churches, drawing criticism from Muslim leaders who oppose the Central Asian state's crackdown on religious freedom.

The lower house of parliament last week passed a "parental responsibility" bill that would make it illegal to allow children to be part of a religious institution not officially sanctioned by the state.

Authorities say the measures are necessary to prevent the spread of religious fundamentalism.

Muslim leaders said the law, the brainchild of President Emomali Rakhmon, would only increase discontent among the majority Muslim population.

"It's a black day for Muslims. Even in Soviet times, such punitive measures and religious persecution did not exist," said prominent Muslim theologian Akbar Turadzhonzoda. "If

the state doesn't want to, the people will defend their faith themselves."

The bill would also ban young girls from wearing jewelry beyond a single pair of earrings and make it illegal for them to be tattooed or visit nightclubs until they turn 20.

Parents must also give their children a "suitable name" and ban them from drinking alcohol, smoking and taking drugs. The penalties for breaching the new laws have not been published.

Tajikistan, which shares a 1,340-kilometer border with Afghanistan, has accused religious groups of stoking unrest. Rakhmon last year called home students from religious schools abroad and criticized a growing trend for Islamic dress.

The law now passes to the upper house of parliament, but few doubt that the docile Senate will approve the bill for Rakhmon to sign into law. The president has ruled Tajikistan since 1992.

Turadzhonzoda, who became deputy prime minister after a power-sharing agreement that brought a 1992-97 civil war to an end, said he sympathized with all Muslims about the new bill.

"You cannot frighten believers with fines, arrest and imprisonment," he said. "If discontent grows, it could lead to a standoff with the government of the likes seen in Tunisia and Egypt."

More than 98 percent of Tajikistan's 7.5 million population is Muslim. Groups representing the Christian minority also expressed unhappiness and confusion about the new laws.

"Churches and Christian organizations are faced with a dilemma: Now can we help our parishioners without breaking the law but continuing to honor our rules?" the evangelical group River of Life said in a statement.

The group represents most of Tajikistan's 2,500 Protestants. The country is also home to another 70,000 ethnic Russians, most of whom are Orthodox Christians.

In a separate amendment passed by the lower house last week, the founders of unregistered religious schools attended by adolescents could be jailed for five to 12 years.

Tajik authorities imprisoned 158 people last year on charges of belonging to banned religious organizations, up from 37 in the previous year. A local BBC correspondent was detained last week on such charges.

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