

Tajikistan Bans Youth From Mosques

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DUSHANBE — Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon has banned youths from praying in mosques and churches, prompting a local Muslim leader to call the move "a gruesome gift" for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Rakhmon, in power since 1992, signed the bill on "parental responsibility" on Wednesday. He has said tough measures are needed to stop the spread of religious fundamentalism in his country of 7.5 million people, 98 percent of whom are Muslim.

All people under 18, except those studying at religious schools, are banned from worshipping in the nation's mosques, churches or other religious sites said the law which came into force on Thursday. It also bans girls from wearing jewelry except earrings and prohibits people under 20 from getting tattoos, going to night clubs and watching films or reading material which "disseminates pornography, violence, extremism and terrorism."

It is not clear what the punishment is for breaking the ban.

"During the month of Ramadan and just a month before the 20th anniversary of [Tajikistan's] independence, the authorities made a gruesome present to all believers," prominent Muslim

theologian Akbar Turajonzoda told Reuters.

Rakhmon, whose Moscow-backed secular government clashed with the Islamist opposition during a 1992-1997 civil war, has ignored requests from the United States and European Union to respect the freedom of conscience.

"The president must have forgotten that the law of God is superior to the earthly law," said Turajonzoda, a former opposition leader. "This is why I doubt that under fear of fines young people will stop paying respect to Allah by praying."

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