

Ambassador

Erkin Kasymov

Your Excellency,

I am writing to express my concern about the continued imprisonment of Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov of the Sunmin Sunbogym Church. Pastor Kholmatov was arrested on April 10, 2017. On July 20 the same year, the Khujand City Court in Tajikistan's Sogd Region sentenced him to three years in prison for allegedly "singing extremist songs in church and so inciting 'religious hatred'".

Pastor Kholmatov's crime is allegedly that his church used songs based on Biblical texts, such as "Praise God, O unbelieving country", "God's army is marching", and "Our fight is not against blood and flesh". Religious experts consider these songs as "extremist" and "a call on people to overthrow the government". On the contrary, these songs and books explore peaceful perspectives on God and Christian life. They contain no calls for violence and are certainly no threat, neither to people nor to the government.

Pastor Kholmatov has been imprisoned for activities that constitute peaceful practice of his Christian faith. Consequently, his arrest and sentencing can only be based on his religious beliefs. These actions against Pastor Kholmatov are, therefore, in violation of international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Tajikistan is a State Party.

Your Excellency, I am concerned that Pastor Kholmatov's arrest indicate a need for greater protection of the Freedom of Religion or Belief in Tajikistan. Indeed, international news agencies report that a number of individuals are facing extremism-related charges for exercising their faiths peacefully, though outside the officially acknowledged religious communities. I understand that Tajikistan needs to protect its citizens against the threat of extremist groups. However, imposing control on believers who practice their faiths peacefully will not defeat extremism.

I humbly petition your intervention in this case to ensure that the basic human rights of Pastor Kholmatov are respected and the judgement of the court is overturned. I also urge you to use your influence to ensure that all individuals in Tajikistan can practice their faith through peaceful means. I appreciate, in advance, any actions you might take in this regard.

Yours sincerely,