



TAJKISTAN: REPRISALS AGAINST PAMIRI MINORITY

SUPPRESSION OF LOCAL IDENTITY, CLAMPDOWN ON ALL DISSENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO)¹ is a region in the remote Pamir mountains of East Tajikistan, the home of distinct ethnic groups. Together, they form the Pamiri minority communities whom the central authorities do not recognize as a minority. The Tajikistani state officially denies the existence of a Pamiri minority. However, despite regarding Pamiris as ethnic Tajiks, the central Tajikistani authorities have consistently subjected them to discrimination and promoted a culture of prejudice against them, and in recent years have stepped up their efforts to suppress the use of Pamiri languages, Pamiri cultural practices, and the expression of Pamiri identity.

Post 1990s civil war and 2021-2022 flashpoints

After the 1990s civil war, the central government in Dushanbe has viewed GBAO as a stronghold of potential political opposition, and has sought to establish full effective political and economic control over the region and reduce its de facto autonomy. The presence of multiple security agencies in GBAO has been increased. The number of ethnic Pamiris within these agencies has been reduced and those remaining left in subordinate positions.

These policies and practices have led to tensions and recurring protests that were brutally suppressed. A flashpoint was reached in November 2021 after the unlawful killing of activist Gulbiddin Ziyobekov by security forces. His killing led to an overwhelmingly peaceful four-day protest in the local capital Khorugh, during which law enforcement agencies again used unlawful force, killing two protesters and injuring 17, and later arresting numerous others who participated in the protest. A second flashpoint occurred in May 2022 when the authorities violently dispersed a peaceful protest march in Khorugh and a reportedly peaceful, according to eyewitnesses, protest rally in Rushan district. Dozens of Pamiris were killed in May and June 2022, giving rise to credible allegations that some influential Pamiri figures were unlawfully killed, including in ways that amounted to extrajudicial executions by security forces. With mobile communications disabled, however, all independent information from GBAO suppressed, access to the region restricted, and human rights activists, journalists and witnesses persecuted, the rest of the world was not able to gain much information about these events.

Repression of dissent and crackdown on civil society in GBAO

The Tajikistani authorities proceeded to quash all dissent. They cracked down on civil society in GBAO and arbitrarily detained over 200 human rights defenders, dissenters and influential figures in the Pamiri communities. At the same time, Pamiris were targeted in the Russian Federation, where a number were reportedly either abducted by Tajikistani security agents or forcibly returned by the Russian authorities and detained on arrival in Tajikistan.

To justify these reprisals, the Tajikistani authorities arbitrarily portrayed Pamiri activists and protesters as criminals, in the media and in their communications with international human rights monitoring mechanisms. The crackdown on protesters in Rushan district of GBAO in May 2022 was officially presented as an “anti-terrorist operation,” but the evidence provided in support of this narrative was unconvincing.

Local activists sought to prevent further escalation, in particular by engaging with the authorities to ensure effective investigation of the alleged unlawful killings that had sparked the protests (the initiative known as the Commission of 44). Yet many of them themselves were subsequently detained, prosecuted and imprisoned under arbitrary terrorism-related and other charges.

Further to the security forces’ targeting of the informal leadership on all levels and of individuals who had influence among their respective peer groups and were able to mobilize for collective action, ordinary Pamiris were also targeted. Young men in particular were often arbitrarily arrested, detained, interrogated, tortured or otherwise ill-treated and prosecuted, including for their peaceful participation in protest events or for otherwise exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. They were typically charged with “crimes against public safety”, “crimes against the fundamentals of the constitutional order and the security of the state”, and “crimes against the order of administration” (violence against or insults of state officials). Most trials were held behind closed doors and proceedings or verdicts have not been made public. Many trials were rushed, lasting only for few days. Meanwhile,

¹ The official designation of the region by the government of Tajikistan is the Kūhīstōni Badakhshōn Autonomous Province, also referred to in acronym form as VMKB. The authors have chosen to follow the internationally common term of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, which is the name used during the former Soviet Union, but is still what the region is referred to both locally and internationally in the majority of documents and statements.

lawyers as well were subjected to harassment and pressure, and prevented from sharing any details of trials publicly, under threat of prosecution.

In the aftermath of the May 2022 crackdown, the security forces also arbitrarily summoned relatives, neighbours, friends and even acquaintances of informal community leaders for interrogation, and often detained them without any evidence of any wrongdoing or even their individual involvement in any political activity.

Torture and other ill-treatment

In custody of police and other law enforcement agencies, torture and other ill-treatment are commonplace. They are used as means of ensuring submission to any demands, to extract information, to coerce individuals to sign “confessions,” or to make incriminating statements in public. Reported means of torture range from using hammers to crush fingers, to placement of needles under nails, electric shocks, sleep deprivation and other methods.

Pamiri interlocutors consistently reported that interrogating officers were ethnic Tajiks from other regions of the country. It was common among such officers to use insults and verbal denigrations and the insults typically contained sexual, ethnic and religious layers.

Conditions in Tajikistani penitentiary facilities are reportedly harsh, and prisons are overcrowded. Consistent reports indicate that food provided to inmates by the prison administration is insufficient and inadequate. Prisoners depend on their families and their wider social network for food and medicines. Direct complaints about conditions in detention, or torture and other ill-treatment, however, are rare as survivors not only lack trust in the system but understand the risk of severe reprisals.

Following the violent crackdown post May 2022, many Pamiri women experienced gender-based violence and harassment by members of law enforcement agencies from other parts of Tajikistan, deployed in GBAO.

Fear of reprisals

Fear of brutal reprisals is part of daily life for many Pamiris, both inside GBAO, throughout Tajikistan and even abroad. For instance, the authorities have repeatedly and indiscriminately coerced and blackmailed GBAO residents to make statements to discredit and denigrate well-known community members and denounce protest activities. These statements were broadcast on regional TV. Victims of this practice were typically members of the Pamiri community over whom the authorities had some leverage, such as employees of state institutions, including educational institutions, employees of companies reliant on state funding or state permits, and applicants for public services.

Moral suffering has endured, exposing the victims to social ostracism from their families and wider community. Outside of Tajikistan, the precedents of forcible returns, extradition and abductions from Russia in particular, have led to anxiety amongst Pamiris in Russia, and encouraged their further outmigration to third countries.

Security forces have also routinely put pressure on emigrees’ relatives and acquaintances in Tajikistan, to coerce them to return to Tajikistan. Such pressure has included threats on social media, home visits, summons for interrogation or taking people into custody.

Economic, social and cultural rights

The aggregate and long-term impact of these and other measures and practices also amounts to violations of economic, social, and cultural rights insofar as they lead to the impoverishment of the Pamiri minority in Tajikistan and the curtailment of its socioeconomic potential. With GBAO as the poorest region in Tajikistan, the state plays a key role in providing local employment and income. This also gives the Tajikistani authorities considerable additional leverage over the local population. The central authorities have also been increasingly replacing locals, Pamiris, with non-Pamiris in senior positions in the civilian administration.

The non-state sector of the local economy has played a major role in the development of the economy of GBAO, and has included entities affiliated with the global Ismaili community, in particular the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), as well as NGOs working with grants from international donors. For years, AKDN-affiliated entities were negatively portrayed in the government-owned and pro-government Tajikistani media, yet remained open and in operation until 2022. After the May 2022 crackdown, AKDN-affiliated entities were closed, and the authorities effectively restricted the space for NGOs with unjustified and excessive audits and reviews. By spring 2023, most of them had been closed, self-liquidated, or suspended their activities under pressure from the security services.

Security forces also used the 2021-22 crackdown in GBAO to unlawfully extract material resources and redistribute wealth at the expense of Pamiris. Harassment of Pamiri owners of small businesses by the authorities and abusive practices by the security forces after the crackdown in May 2022 have decreased the profitability of businesses, e.g., through arbitrary and excessive inspections by the tax authorities, or extortion by security officers. Local people in the region have faced disproportionate risks not only of detention, but also of having to pay fines and bribes. The continuing repression and persecution, as well as the curbing of access to resources in GBAO and the deterioration of positive future outlooks has triggered the emigration of individuals and whole families abroad, or internal migration to the capital Dushanbe and other parts of Tajikistan. At the same time, the imprisonment and forced migration of significant parts of the male population, has seriously reduced the available workforce and in so doing support for family income. The economic demands on families in the Pamiri community are also being impacted as those with family members in prison have to often provide subsistence to them and in many cases pay bribes.

The government of Tajikistan must immediately end reprisals against members of the Pamiri minority and any dissenting voices, and respect the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and all other human rights, for all. All allegations of extrajudicial execution, unlawful killing, torture and other ill-treatment, and all other reports of human rights violations must be promptly, effectively and impartially investigated, and anyone reasonably suspected of perpetrating, or being complicit, in such human rights violations, including commanding officers and any state officials on whose orders or under whose acquiescence these violations have been committed, be identified and brought to account in fair trial proceedings. Gender-based violence and discrimination must be immediately addressed, and survivors of violence guaranteed protection and effective remedies. All victims of human rights violations in GBAO, and across Tajikistan, must be provided with full and adequate reparations for the damage suffered, including measures of restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition.

The government of Tajikistan should, with the effective and genuine participation of the Pamiri minority communities, review all laws, policies and practices that may be discriminatory, and take all necessary measures to ensure that these are fully compliant with Tajikistan's international human rights obligations, including by repealing or amending the relevant legislation and policies and ending relevant practices, and monitoring the actions of state officials. Members of the Pamiri communities must be able to fully enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 TAJIKISTAN AND GBAO

Tajikistan is located in Central Asia and borders Uzbekistan to the west, Kyrgyzstan to the north, China to the east, and Afghanistan to the south. Its population was estimated at 8.93 million in 2017.² According to the census in 2010, 84.3 percent of the population were counted as ethnic Tajiks including Pamiris.³

GBAO is located in the remote Pamir mountains of East Tajikistan with a population of around 223,600 in 2018.⁴ Khorugh, the regional capital with around 29,000 inhabitants, is located at the intersection of the Panj, Ghund, and Shokhdara rivers. Remittances and tourism have been the main income sources, along with employment from the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Since the Tajikistan civil war of the 1990s, the AKDN has played a key role in the region, after it began providing humanitarian aid in GBAO, in the spheres of local governance, education, health, energy, and others.⁵

1.2 GBAO IN INDEPENDENT TAJIKISTAN

After Tajikistan gained independence in 1991, long-standing tensions between different political and regional groups, including those from politically underrepresented regions, came to a head, and a civil war broke out in 1992. The regional parliament of GBAO proclaimed the Autonomous Republic of Badakhshan in 1992 without obtaining recognition from the central authorities for this designation. Armed groups formed by Pamiris fought on the side of the forces that came to be collectively known as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Later in the conflict, they withdrew to GBAO and prevented government troops from entering the region. Many Pamiri Ismailis from other parts of the country fled to GBAO in order to escape the violence. The civil war ended with a peace settlement, reached in 1997, and the creation of the Commission on National Reconciliation that brought together the government and the United Tajik Opposition and enabled transition towards a power-sharing government.⁶ After a period of being outside of control of the central government, GBAO was gradually reintegrated under the newly-formed Tajikistani authorities and under the Constitution adopted in 1994 which granted it a vaguely defined status of an autonomous region, distinct from other regions of Tajikistan.⁷

After the civil war of the 1990s, the central government in Dushanbe perceived GBAO as a stronghold of potential political opposition, and has sought to establish full effective political and economic control over GBAO and reduce its de facto autonomy.

Human rights violations, such as unlawful killings and arbitrary detentions, which went along with the attempts by the authorities to remove informal Pamiri leaders,⁸ led to the amalgamation and mobilization of an active civil society, resulting in public protests to which

² Demographic data on the population of administrative units was provided by the Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan in its *Demographic Yearbook 2018*: <https://stat.tj/storage/publications/June2019/demographic-yearbook-2018.pdf> (last accessed on 14 June 2023). However, demographic data is unreliable in Tajikistan.

³ Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Национальный состав, владение языками и гражданство населения Республики Таджикистан, Том III*, 2012, p. 7: https://web.archive.org/web/20131014054442/http://www.stat.tj/ru/img/526b8592e834fcaacce26a22965ea2b_1355501132.pdf (last accessed on 22 August 2024). The most significant national minorities, according to the 2010 census, are Uzbeks (12.2 percent), Kyrgyz (0.8 percent) and Russians (0.5 percent). As Pamiris are not recognized as national minorities, they cannot identify as such in the census and are counted as Tajiks. In the 2020 census, the results of which were not publicly available yet at the time of editing, 86.1 percent of the population were counted as ethnic Tajiks, according to a government official: see Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 109th session, Summary record of the 2971st meeting, 20 April 2023, para. 5: https://tbineternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2FC%2FSR.2971&Lang=en (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁴ Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan *Demographic Yearbook 2018*, p. 20: <https://stat.tj/storage/publications/June2019/demographic-yearbook-2018.pdf> (last accessed on 14 June 2023).

⁵ AKDN, *Where We Work*: <https://the.akdn/en/where-we-work/central-asia/tajikistan> (last accessed on 14 June 2023). Between 1995 and 2018, AKDN committed over one billion US-dollars for activities in Tajikistan.

⁶ UN General Assembly Security Council, Letter from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, 1 July 1997, pp. 9-10.

⁷ The Constitution of Tajikistan, Chapter 7, Art. 81-83: <https://mfa.tj/en/main/tajikistan/constitution> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁸ In July 2012, security forces attacked three neighbourhoods of Khorugh which were defended by local armed groups, resulting in civilian casualties, as analyzed in the monitoring report published by civil society organizations in 2013: The Civic Solidarity Platform, *Monitoring of Observance of Human Rights in Connection with the Special Operation Conducted on 24 July 2012 in Khorog, Tajikistan*, 2013: https://civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/monitoring_report_en_final.pdf (last accessed on 22 August 2024). In August 2012, one informal community leader, Imomnazar Imomnazarov, was killed during an assault on his home in Khorugh: RFE/RL, "Former Tajik Opposition

the central government forces responded with the use of force, and resulting in clashes in Khorugh in 2012, 2014, and 2018. Such protests, as well as the relative strength and autonomy of Pamiri civil society, were perceived as a threat by the authorities and the security forces. Informal community leaders and civil society activists were increasingly depicted as criminal, “terrorist” and “extremist” by state propaganda. During and after a speech of President Emomali Rahmon in September 2018 in which he alleged a threat to law and order in GBAO by organized crime,⁹ the presence of security forces significantly increased. A flashpoint was reached in November 2021 when the killing of activist Gulbiddin Ziyobekov by security forces led to a largely peaceful four-day protest event in Khorugh. Some protesters allegedly threw stones on 27 November, but no other violence by the protesters was reported. However, the security forces (as occurred in the past) used firearms, killing two protesters and allegedly injuring around a dozen. Subsequently, a surveillance infrastructure, including facial recognition and other advanced equipment, was built in Khorugh and the pressure on informal community leaders, organized civil society, and ordinary residents increased. This caused UN special rapporteurs to warn in April 2022 that, “disregard of the Pamiri minority grievances by Tajik authorities and the securitization of the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region where they live could lead to a violent conflict if unaddressed.”¹⁰

A second flashpoint occurred in May 2022 when the authorities violently dispersed a peaceful protest march in Khorugh and a reportedly peaceful (according to several eyewitness accounts) protest rally in Rushan district. Dozens of Pamiri were killed in May and June 2022. Colonel Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov was among them, an influential informal community leader who was allegedly extrajudicially executed. Subsequently, the authorities cracked down on civil society in GBAO and arbitrarily detained over 200 human rights defenders, dissenters and influential figures in the Pamiri communities. At the same time, Pamiris were also targeted in the Russian Federation, where a number were reportedly either abducted by Tajikistani security agents or forcibly returned by the authorities of the Russian Federation and detained in Tajikistan. After the crackdown, the authorities stepped up their efforts to suppress the use of Pamiri languages, Pamiri cultural practices, and the expression of Pamiri identity.¹¹

1.3 PAMIRIS AS A NON-RECOGNIZED ETHNORELIGIOUS MINORITY

The Pamiris are a group of distinct ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious communities originating from the valleys of the Pamir mountains. Together, they form the Pamiri minority, and mainly live in GBAO,¹² but also in adjacent regions of Afghanistan and China. The Pamiris speak different languages and interrelated sub-dialects belonging to the Eastern Iranian sub-group of the Indo-European family of languages. In contrast, the Tajik language is classified as a Southwestern Iranian language. The majority of Pamiris belong to the Ismaili Shi’a branch of Islam and are followers of the Aga Khan.¹³ Other groups identifying as Pamiri, such as residents of the Yazgulyam and Vanj valleys, adhere to Sunni branches of Islam like the vast majority of the population of Tajikistan.

In Soviet times, people from these heterogeneous mountain communities, whose identities previously were based on their respective language and origin from certain valleys and regions, developed a collective identity layer as “Pamiris.” This identity layer gained importance during the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-97), when Pamiris in Western Tajikistan were othered and targeted for violent persecution on ethnic, linguistic, and religious grounds.¹⁴ During and after the civil war the religious identity became increasing significant. There was a gradual expansion of direct contacts between Pamiri Ismailis and the global Ismaili community, an expanding presence of Ismaili religious institutions and development organizations in GBAO, and an increased contact with Ismailis in other regions of the world, facilitated by the Ismaili Imam.¹⁵ Economic and social discrimination of Pamiris by the state further reinforced their ethnic and religious identities.¹⁶ One Pamiri man describes the trauma of the civil war and the sense of vulnerability within the community:

Field Commander Killed In Badakhshan”, 22 August 2012: <https://www.rferl.org/a/former-tajik-opposition-field-commander-in-badakhshan/24684382.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). In May 2014, security forces killed one influential figure in an attack on his car in Khorugh, with one other person receiving injuries and later dying in hospital: Suzanne Levi-Sanchez, *Bridging State and Civil Society. Informal Organizations in Tajik/Afghan Badakhshan*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. In August 2018, protesters in Khorugh criticized the conditions of imprisonment of two detainees: <https://fergana.media/articles/102296/>. In November 2021, another rally was held in Khorugh after one resident had been non-fatally shot by a security officer: Fergana, “*Семь самураев. Рахмону удалось подтвердить свою власть над Памиром*”, 31 October 2018: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-rally-in-pamirs-ups-the-ante-in-confrontation-with-government> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁹ The speech was given in the Botanical Garden in Khorugh on 15 September 2018: <http://www.president.tj/ru/node/18426> (last accessed 22 April 2023). The actual speech differed significantly and was summarized in an article published by Radio Ozodi: Mullorajab Yusufzoda, “*момали Рахмон потребовал установить закон и порядок в Хоруге*”, *Radio Ozodi*, 17 September 2018: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29493714.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁰ UN Human Rights Office Of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), “Tajikistan: UN Experts Sound Alarm about Tensions in GBAO, Urge Protection of Pamiri Minority”, 20 April 2022: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/04/tajikistan-un-experts-sound-alarm-about-tensions-gbao-urge-protection-pamiri> (last accessed 22 August 2024).

¹¹ For a chronology of events, detailed information and further sources, see the documentation compiled by the initiative Roof-top Info, *What is happening in Tajikistan?*, 7 March 2024: <https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/file/background-information-on-the-situation-in-kh/download/Background-information-on-the-situation-in-Khorugh.pdf>. Roof-top Info has also prepared a story map which contextualizes the individual events of the crackdown in GBAO geographically: https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en/map/crackdown-on-civil-society-in-gbao-tajikistan_812355 (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹² Minority Rights Group, Pamiris in Tajikistan, March 2023, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/pamiris/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹³ The Aga Khan is the hereditary imam (spiritual leader) of the Nizari Ismaili Shi’a and believed to be in a line of succession to prophet Mohammad. The current Aga Khan IV is Karim al-Husayn Shah (born 1936) known to his followers by his religious title Mawlana Hazar Imam.

¹⁴ Kirill Nourzhanov; Christian Bleuer, *Tajikistan. A political and social history*, 2013. Canberra: ANU Press, pp. 328-329:

<http://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/33528>. Tim Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan. Nationalism, Islamism and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space*, 2016. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 346-347.

¹⁵ The Ismaili, “The Ismaili Community”: <https://the.ismaili/global/about-us/the-ismaili-community> (last accessed on 5 August 2024).

¹⁶ For quotations of Pamiri interlocutors about their identity, see the ADC Memorial, report submitted to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD Committee) in 2017, pp. 6-10: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/TajCERDeng3.pdf> (last accessed on 5 August 2024). In its Concluding observations on the combined ninth to eleventh periodic reports of Tajikistan in 2017, the UN CERD Committee addressed “prejudices held by the general public towards Roma/Jughi and other minorities, such as Pamiri”: Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Concluding observations on the combined ninth to eleventh periodic reports of Tajikistan*,

“Those who are in power [now] are the fighters who fought against the Pamiris during the [civil] war. He [the typical senior security officer] has been thinking for 30 years how to kill him [any Pamiri adversary] [...] how he will torture him. [...] Whenever there is a special [military] operation [in GBAO], the people stand up and the UN supports us. They want to eliminate us. But the UN listens to us because we are small indigenous peoples.”¹⁷

Similarly, a Pamiri human rights defender in exile described a deeply engrained awareness of the community’s vulnerability and the perceived need to protect the shared identity from extinction:

“You always have the feeling that you are a minority and have to be protected. [...] You always have this defensive attitude and have the feeling that you have to be ready [in case somebody attacks the group verbally or physically]. [...] This feeling is always with the Pamiris because of all the attempts of assimilation and genocide we had in the past will happen again and again. [...] Whether somebody makes a joke at school, a taxi driver in Dushanbe asks you out of context whether you are a Pamiri, or a Tajik guy approaches a Pamiri girl, you take it very personally, it is about protecting the identity. You carry this protective and defensive feeling with you and cannot get rid of it. That’s why the Pamiris did not give up fighting for their rights, even if everybody knew that the Pamiris could not stand against the government.”¹⁸

The government and legal system of Tajikistan do not recognize Pamiris as distinct ethnic groups but register and count them as ethnic Tajiks. This is a legacy of Soviet ethnic policy.¹⁹ The 2010 census counted 194,423 out of 205,949 inhabitants of GBAO (94%) as ethnic “Tajik,” without listing “Pamiri” or any relevant subcategory as ethnicities.²⁰ As well, the 2010 census avoided reporting on Pamiri languages.²¹

Consequently, in the report on the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) submitted by Tajikistan in 2020, neither Pamiris nor their languages were mentioned, in contrast to recognized minorities like Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, or Russians.²² In the 2971st Meeting of the 109th Session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD Committee) on 20 April 2023, the Tajikistani delegation stated that “the Pamiris were not considered to be a minority, as they were true Tajiks and had lived so for centuries.”²³ In its concluding observations, the UN CERD Committee regretted that “the State party does not recognize, in accordance with the principle of self-identification [...] the Pamiri as a distinct group of people living on the territory of the State party which are subject to marginalization and discrimination.”²⁴

At the same time, negative perceptions and stereotypes about Pamiris based on linguistic, religious, cultural and political grounds are common among the non-Pamiri population of Tajikistan.²⁵ One Pamiri man from GBAO describes how he interprets the perception of Pamiris by ethnic Tajik security officers:

¹⁹ September 2017, Par. 27.; https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CERD%2FC%2FTJK%2FCO%2F9-11&Lang=en (last accessed on 5 August 2024).

¹⁷ Interview identifier #210, with a Pamiri Ismaili man who had experienced the civil war, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹⁸ Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri Ismaili human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

¹⁹ On the mechanisms of statistical assimilation of Pamiris into the “Tajik” ethnicity in the censuses in Soviet times, see Krista A. Goff, *Nested nationalism. Making and unmaking nations in the Soviet Caucasus*, 2020. Ithaca [NY] and London: Cornell University Press: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501753299>.

²⁰ Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Национальный состав, владение языками и гражданство населения Республики Таджикистан, Том III (2010)*, p. 109 and 245: https://web.archive.org/web/20131014054442/http://www.stat.tj/ru/img/526b8592e834fcaacc26a22965ea2b_1355501132.pdf (last accessed on 14 June 2023). In addition to “Tajiks”, the census counted 10,949 ethnic Kyrgyz, 410 ethnic Uzbeks, 81 ethnic Russians, 3 ethnic Turkmen and 83 members of other ethnic groups living in GBAO.

²¹ Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Национальный состав, владение языками и гражданство населения Республики Таджикистан, Том III (2010)* P. 12.. Cross-tabulating ethnicity and mother tongue, the document alleged that 6,373,834 out of 6,357,071 persons counted as ethnic Tajiks (99.7 percent) spoke “the language of their ethnic group” as their mother tongue, whereas the remaining 0.3 percent speak either Russian or “other languages” as their mother tongue. The category “other languages” is not disaggregated, i.e. Pamiri languages do not appear in the public census document.

²² UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Combined twelfth and thirteenth periodic reports submitted by Tajikistan under article 9 of the Convention*, 10 February 2020: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CERD%2FC%2FTJK%2F12-13&Lang=en (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²³ UN Human Rights Office Of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), Experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Commend Tajikistan on Improved Treatment of Migrants and Asylum Seekers, Ask Questions on Discrimination against the Pamiri Minority and Human Rights Defenders, 21 April 2023: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/04/experts-committee-elimination-racial-discrimination-commend-tajikistan-improved> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁴ UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Concluding observations on the combined twelfth and thirteenth periodic reports of Tajikistan*, 24 May 2023, Para. 5: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CERD%2FC%2FTJK%2FCO%2F12-13&Lang=en (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁵ For an assessment of negative stereotypes about Pamiris in Tajikistan, see the ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s Ninth to Eleventh Periodic Reports for 2012–2015*, pp. 6-10: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/TajCERDeng3.pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024), as well as the following report: ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020*, 20 March 2023, pp. 3-4: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/adcmemorial-cerd-109-session-tajikistan-april-2023-eng-final.pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). An example of what this means in a daily life is reflected in the account of an incident in Dushanbe of an ethnic Pamiri living in Dushanbe being insulted for her Pamiri origin by a neighbour, which was made public in an open letter to the Mayor of Dushanbe by the victim herself in September 2023, and supplemented with video footage, as published by her on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/takhmina.nagzibekova/posts/pfbid0nUWwQbU4CnJkHwWjEuuYfCepuF56MhwAgLA9faetg533gyGgyZs1RLdHvGusdh71> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

“The word ‘Pamiri’ [for the security forces] means Pamiri, Ismaili, Shiite, separatist, oppositionist, main enemy. [...] For example, they killed Mamadbokir [Mamadbokirov on 22 May 2022] and immediately afterwards destroyed the Ismaili flag on the mountain [slope]. They see in it separatism, Ismailism, enmity. They believe that we are steered by Europe.”²⁶

The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues after his country visit to Tajikistan in October 2023, in spite of the denial of recognition by the authorities, came to the following conclusion regarding the Pamiris:

“Their isolation in a mountainous region in the far eastern part of the country, among such other factors as their distinct cultures and religion, nevertheless clearly means that they are to be considered as a minority under international provisions of international law, such as article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”²⁷

In the following text, unless a specific dimension of identity is referred to, the term “Pamiri” is used to denote the group targeted by the authorities and security agencies, sometimes used interchangeably with the term “Pamiri Ismaili,” to acknowledge that the ethnic and religious dimensions of the identity may be of particular importance to different individuals.²⁸

1.4 SECURITY FORCES DEPLOYED IN GBAO

The presence of multiple security agencies in GBAO significantly increased after 2018.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA, *Вазорати корҳои дохилӣ*) oversees within its command the regular police (*милиция*), the traffic police, the Department for Combating Organized Crime (*Раёсати мубориза бо ҷиноятҳои муташаккил*, also called Sixth Department or Unit Six - *Шӯъбаи шашум*), as well as the anti-riot units known as OMON. The regional headquarters of the MIA is in the Selkhoztekhnika neighbourhood of the regional capital Khorugh, and the MIA runs a detention facility in the eastern outskirts of Khorugh.

The State Committee for National Security (SCNS, *Кумитаи давлатии амнияти миллӣ*), which is a stand-alone security agency, has command over the border guards and the Alpha special forces. The SCNS has its regional headquarters in downtown Khorugh and the border guards have a large base in the Tirchid (locally referred to as UPD) neighbourhood of Khorugh which reportedly hosts an SCNS detention facility.

The Ministry of Defence (*Вазорати мудофиа*) has under its control the National Guard, which has a large base in Selkhoztekhnika neighbourhood of Khorugh close to the airport.

Both the Office of the Prosecutor General (*Прокуратураи генералӣ*), which is nominally responsible for supervision of other law enforcement agencies, and the courts effectively lack independence from the central government in practice. In its mission report published in December 2020, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) highlighted that “the acquittal rate in criminal trials appears to be close to zero” and took this as an indirect indicator showing that “the administration of justice in criminal proceedings cannot be fair.”²⁹ The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders reported after her visit to Tajikistan in December 2022 that she had “a lot of concerns about the lack of independence of the judiciary both as a result of certain aspects of legislation, and due to interference from other branches of the government, especially the executive, and also of other private and partisan interests.”³⁰ In 2017, Amnesty International had drawn attention to the “effect of the harassment and persecution of lawyers in Tajikistan, combined with the recent, drastic reduction in the number of registered lawyers (*advokaty*) [which is] crippling for the respect for rights in the country.”³¹

Mistrusting ethnic Pamiri employees due to suspicions of conflicting multiple loyalties, the security agencies deployed ethnic Tajiks from other parts of the country to GBAO, leaving Pamiris only in subordinate positions, as reported by the Anti-Discrimination Center (ADC) Memorial, which is known for having reliable sources in and from GBAO, in its Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in March 2023.³² As a result, many

²⁶ Interview identifier #210, with a Pamiri Ismaili man who had experienced the civil war, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁷ Human Rights Council. Visit to Tajikistan: report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, 13 February 2024, par. 64: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁸ There are both Ismaili and non-Ismaili Pamiris in GBAO. Both are being targeted by the government of Tajikistan, as documented in this report.

²⁹ International Commission of Jurists, *Neither Check nor Balance: the Judiciary in Tajikistan*, Mission Report, December 2020, p. 63: <https://icj2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Tajikistan-Judiciary-Publications-Reports-Mission-report-2020-ENG.pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

³⁰ OHCHR, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Preliminary observations and recommendations Dushanbe, 9 December 2022, p. 4: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/defenders/2022-12-08/EoM-Visit-Tajikistan-9Dec2022-EN.docx> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

³¹ Amnesty International, “In the line of duty: Harassment, prosecution and imprisonment of lawyers in Tajikistan”, (Index: EUR 60/6266/2017), May 23, 2017, p. 5: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur60/6266/2017/en/>.

³² ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020*, 20 March 2023, p. 3, <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/adcmemorial-cerd-109-session-tajikistan-april-2023-eng-final.pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). It was also observed by an anonymous author from GBAO in an article published in December 2021: Pamir Inside, “О ситуации в ГБАО. Какое морально-психологическое давление испытывает население региона”, 29 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/о-ситуации-в-гбао-какое-морально-психологическое-давление-испытывает-население-региона/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

ethnic Tajik members of the security forces were in positions of power. The fact that security officers (mostly Tajik Sunnis) and victims (usually Pamiri Ismailis) belonged to different ethnoreligious groups exacerbated the power imbalance and the level of discrimination.

With all of the security agencies in GBAO reporting directly to officials in the capital, Dushanbe, the civilian authorities of the region did not have any security forces under their command. In 2018, the Inter-Agency Committee on Enforcement of Law and Order in GBAO (Ситоди байниидоравии таъмини амният ва тартиботи ҷамъиятӣ дар ВМКБ) was established under the command of Lt.-Gen. Abdurahmon Alamshozoda, an ethnic Tajik and the head of the MIA in GBAO,³³ to coordinate different security agencies. It developed into a powerful structure which was perceived as wielding considerable influence in civilian affairs and not being accountable to the civilian authorities of the region. One anonymous author observed in December 2021:

“The local authorities effectively do not have any possibility to influence the situation. This became even clearer after the appointment of Alisher Khudoberdi Mirzonabot, an SCNS general, as governor of GBAO [in early November 2021]. The previous governor of GBAO, Yodgor Fayzov, had sometimes been able to afford not to agree on actions taken by the security forces in GBAO. It was for this reason that he was removed from his position.”³⁴

One Pamiri human rights defender in exile, who observed the developments in GBAO from outside, summarized the power dynamics in GBAO after 2018, said that:

“The relation between the civilian administration and the security agencies was complex. The security agencies never showed publicly that they were stronger. But they were stronger and the civilian administration was afraid of them. For example, [an acquaintance with whom I communicated very frequently at that time] once went to see Buzmakov [former last name of Abdurahmon Alamshozoda, the Deputy Minister of the Interior and head of the Inter-Agency Committee] in Khorugh and saw [Yodgor] Fayzov [GBAO Governor] waiting in the corridor. Usually, it should not be like this [it should be viceversa]. [...] All the powerful heads of the security agencies were sent [to GBAO] from Dushanbe and had direct links to the [President’s] family [in contrast to the governors]. [...] Fayzov [GBAO Governor until November 2021] had a good reputation and did not depend on a career in the government, [because of this leverage] the security agencies were careful with him. But Mirzonabot [GBAO Governor since November 2021] fully depends on [those close to the President’s] family and his governmental career.”³⁵

The Draft study by the UN’s Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on the impact of militarization on the rights of Indigenous Peoples published in July 2023 stated: “It has also been alleged that the land of the Pamiri people residing in the Pamir mountains of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast in Tajikistan is under high surveillance and is heavily militarized, with alleged cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture of detainees.”³⁶

1.5 METHODOLOGY

Members of the research team behind this report are either from the region or have gained knowledge of GBAO and built networks among the Pamiri population during extended visits between 2009 and 2015. One of them lived in GBAO until the early 2020s. Another spent several days in GBAO in the second half of 2022 observing the situation but not identifying as a researcher and not doing systematic research.

General challenges with gathering first-hand information in the region, which is difficult to access, have been highlighted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.³⁷ Access to the field for researchers and journalists has been severely restricted against the background of the crackdown since 2018. Access to the rest of the country has also been restricted for independent human rights monitors, including Amnesty International which has had specific reasons to regard Tajikistan effectively as a closed country since 2017.

Foreigners planning to travel to remote GBAO require a special permit issued by the authorities. Individuals openly identifying as researchers or journalists would either be denied this permit or be extensively surveilled during their stay in GBAO, especially in Khorugh city and Rushan district. Any interviews would put interlocutors at risk of persecution and retaliation. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, who had visited GBAO in the framework of her country visit to Tajikistan in April 2023, reported: “While her delegation reached out to a range of religious and belief communities and faith-based actors in the Province

³³ Khovar, “Кадровые назначения”, Сентябрь 18 September 2018: <https://khover.tj/rus/2018/09/lider-natsii-emomali-rahmon-prizval-vnov-naznachennye-kadry-chestno-i-verno-sluzhit-rodine-i-narodu/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). For information on Alamshozoda’s career, see the official biography as provided on the MIA website: <https://www.mvd.tj/748-alamshozoda-abdurahmon-alamsho-pervyj-zamestitel-ministra-vnutrennih-del-respubliki-tadzhikistan.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

³⁴ Pamir Inside, “О ситуации в ГБАО. Какое морально-психологическое давление испытывает население региона”, 29 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/o-situacii-v-gbao-kakoe-moralno-psihologicheskoe-davlenie-ispityvaet-naselenie-regiona/>, 29 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/o-situacii-v-gbao-kakoe-moralno-psihologicheskoe-davlenie-ispityvaet-naselenie-regiona/>. In this article, the author also mentioned that the regional TV channel “TV Badakhshan” was fully controlled by the SCNS.

³⁵ Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

³⁶ Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Impact of militarization on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, 8 August 2023, Par. 31: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/studies/ahrc5452-impact-militarization-rights-indigenous-peoples-study-expert-mechanism> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

³⁷ Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024, Par. 46: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

[GBAO], it was met with widespread reluctance to speak for fear of reprisals.”³⁸ For these reasons, the report is the product of desk research and remote research carried out between 2022 and 2024.

The research team reviewed statements on GBAO by UN bodies and non-governmental organizations, as well as analyses by scholars and articles by journalists and bloggers.³⁹ Thirty-one interviews were conducted either in-person or via safe electronic channels with 28 Pamiri refugees who had been present in GBAO during certain periods since 2018 but were residing outside of Tajikistan at the time of the interview, and three visitors who had travelled in GBAO after 2021. Apart from this, the report uses first-hand testimonies and second-hand information received from people currently living in GBAO in informal conversations through safe electronic channels.

Access to reliable statistics and other factual information is generally difficult in Tajikistan. Security agencies have incentives to deny human rights violations and to over-report perceived successes like seized weapons or detentions of alleged crime suspects. Freedom of information is severely suppressed in Tajikistan, and independent media or other reporting is largely impossible. The interpretation of demographic statistics is additionally complicated by the fact that Pamiris are not shown, or regarded, as separate ethnic or linguistic groups.

The collection of information has been complicated by various factors. From 16 May 2022 onward, the internet was shut down in parts of GBAO for several weeks, which made it difficult to publish or share information from the region. The security forces reportedly searched the address books, personal correspondence, and photo galleries of detained persons to identify and prosecute their contact persons and find compromising information. As a result, many people deleted audio-visual evidence of protest events and human rights violations from their mobile phones as a precautionary measure. Interception of phones and surveillance by secret informants have led to an atmosphere of fear and an escalating extent of mutual distrust within the Pamiri communities. Taking this into consideration, great care was taken to communicate in ways that have ensured safety of the interlocutors, both inside and outside of Tajikistan. Names and personal details of sources must remain anonymous to avoid negative repercussions for them and their family members by the government of Tajikistan. Where so required by security considerations, some details in the quotes presented below have been omitted to ensure that the respective interlocutors, or those of whom they spoke, cannot be identified; where this is the case, the respective omissions are clearly indicated and explanatory/descriptive notes are added for clarity.

³⁸ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Par. 76: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). Similarly, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues reported about his country visit to Tajikistan in October 2023 that “due to the fear of reprisals, almost no one belonging to minority communities or working for human rights or minority rights organizations was willing to meet with him in-person in Tajikistan”: Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Visit to Tajikistan: report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, 13 February 2024, par. 2, see also par. 49: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

³⁹ For an overview over publications of other stakeholders, see Roof-top info, *What is happening in Tajikistan?*, 7 March 2024, available at: <https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/file/background-information-on-the-situation-in-kh/download/Background-information-on-the-situation-in-Khorugh.pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

2. STATE-SPONSORED NARRATIVES AND NEGATIVE DEPICTION OF PAMIRIS

Tajikistan is obliged under its domestic and international commitments to combat discrimination. Art. 17 of the Constitution stipulates: “The State guarantees the rights and freedoms of everyone regardless of his nationality, race, gender, language, religious beliefs, political persuasion, education, [and] social and property status.”⁴⁰ Speaking to the UN CERD Committee in April 2023, Muzaffar Ashuriyon, the Minister of Justice, said that the country’s legal framework prohibited all forms of discrimination.⁴¹ This includes a Law on Equality and Non-Discrimination which entered into force in July 2022,⁴² and which followed recommendations by the UN’s Universal Periodic Review mechanism that Tajikistan “adopt a comprehensive anti-discrimination law.”⁴³

In practice, however, there have been consistent reports of discrimination against Pamiris. As noted above, for example, in April 2023 the UN CERD Committee regretted that Tajikistan: “does not recognize, in accordance with the principle of self-identification [...] the Pamiri as a distinct group of people living on the territory of the State party which are subject to marginalization and discrimination.”⁴⁴

Whereas the Tajikistani state officially denies the existence of a Pamiri minority and has effectively tabooed the use of the term “Pamiri” (see above), state-sponsored publications and media have indirectly portrayed Pamiris, and particularly Pamiri Ismailis, in a negative light, contributing to a culture of discrimination and prejudice against them. As far back as Soviet times, Ismailism was depicted in a negative light in the writings of Bobojon Ghafurov (1908-1977), a Tajik statesman and scholar of Oriental studies. He described the Ismailism of the 10th and 11th century as “a heresy which was opposed to the orthodox Sunni Islam”. Referring to the Nizari Ismaili state (Alamut state) established in the late 11th century in parts of contemporary Iran and using the undefined and contestable term “terrorist”, he described events of remote past as: “Ismailis form a strong secret terrorist organization directed against the Seljuk rulers. They gain fame as smart and brave terrorists.”⁴⁵ The Tajikistani government promoted his book, *The Tajiks*, as the main textbook in the country after independence. It became mandatory reading at all academic institutions in Tajikistan. In a speech in parliament in 2019, President Emomali Rahmon gave orders to gift a copy of the book to each family in the country with a purpose of “deep learning of the glorious history of our nation”.⁴⁶ In the title of an event organized by the parliament of Tajikistan in 2022, it was praised as the “dictionary of the Tajik nation.”⁴⁷

In an effort to discredit local Pamiri community leaders, to justify the militarization of GBAO and repressive measures, and to deter criticism of crackdowns in GBAO by the public in Tajikistan, the authorities sponsored narratives about public disorder and rampant crime, tying them to the territories populated by Pamiris from 2018 onward. In a speech in Khorugh in September 2018, President Emomali Rahmon alleged that the rates of crime, illegal weapons, drug addiction and related diseases were disproportionately high in

⁴⁰ The Constitution of Tajikistan, Art. 17: <https://mfa.tj/en/main/tajikistan/constitution> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁴¹ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 26 April 2023, p. 2: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2FC%2FSR.2971&Lang=en (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁴² Law of the Republic of Tajikistan On Equality and Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination. Adopted on 15 July 2022, available at https://incz.tj/system/files/Legislation/1890_ru.pdf (last accessed on 16 June 2023).

⁴³ Human Rights Council, *Universal periodic review. Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, Tajikistan*, Forty-ninth session, 28 February – 1 April 2022, Agenda item 6, par. 123.47; <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/49/12> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁴⁴ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding observations on the combined twelfth and thirteenth periodic reports of Tajikistan, par. 5: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2FC%2FTJK%2FCO%2F12-13&Lang=en (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

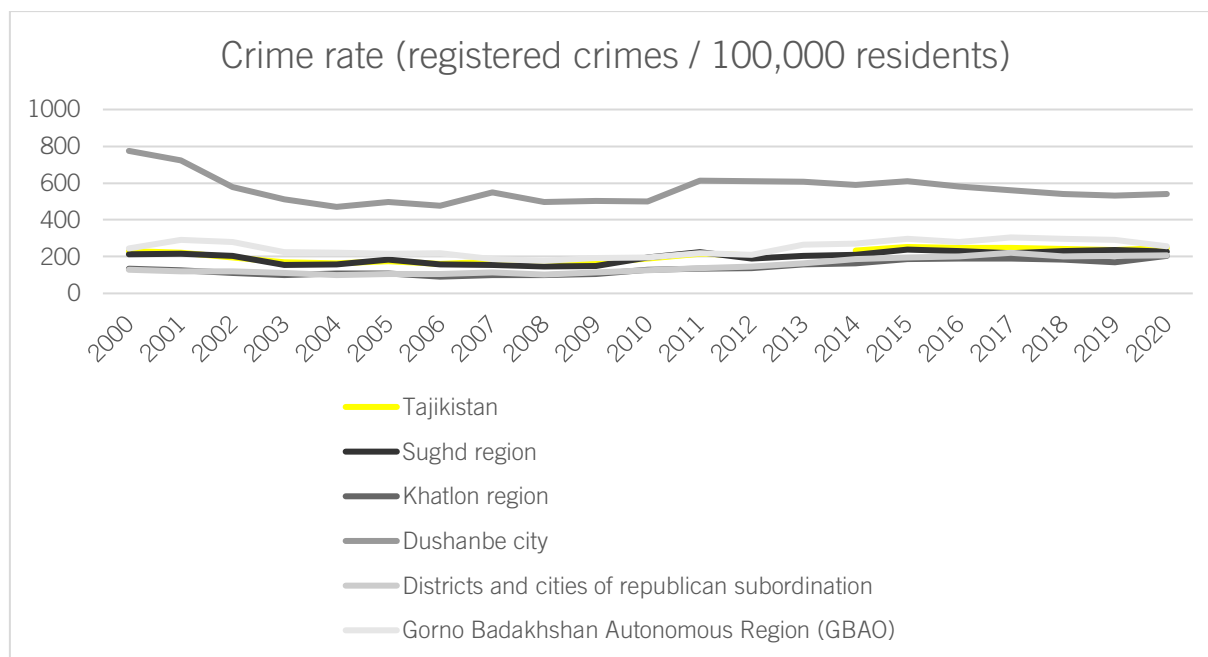
⁴⁵ B.G. Gafurov, *Tadzhiki. Drevneyshaya, drevnyaya i srednevekovaya istoriya* [The Tajiks. Prehistoric, ancient and medieval history]. Vol. 2, 1989, pp. 118-119.

⁴⁶ Official website of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Послание Президента Республики Таджикистан, Лидера нации уважаемого Эмомали Рахмона Маджлиси Оли*, 26 December 2019: <https://www.president.tj/event/missives/19841> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁴⁷ Khovar, «КИТОБИ БОБОҶОН ҒАФУРОВ «ТОҶИКОН»- ҚОМУСИ МИЛЛАТИ ТОҶИК». Дар ин мавзӯ хониши парлумонӣ баргузор шуд, 5 June 2022:

<https://khovar.tj/2022/06/kitobi-bobo-on-afurov-to-ikon-omusi-millati-to-ik-dar-in-mavz-honishi-parlumon-barguzor-shud/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

Khorugh and the surrounding districts.⁴⁸ Shortly thereafter, a video produced by the SCNS and broadcast on national TV disseminated these allegations countrywide.⁴⁹ The claim of a disproportionately high crime rate in GBAO, however, is contravened by the official statistics from 2000 to 2020 as provided by the Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan. In absolute terms, the number of “registered” (that is, officially recorded by the law enforcement agencies as reported incidents) crimes in GBAO is between five and 10 times lower than in other territorial units listed (Sughd Region, Khatlon Region, districts and cities of republican subordination, and the city of Dushanbe),⁵⁰ while GBAO accounts for 45% of the entire country’s territory. However, the region is sparsely populated, and when the crime rate is calculated as the number of reported crimes per capita (based on the official estimate of the population of the respective territories for the same years⁵¹), the official statistics indicate a disproportionately high crime rate in the capital city Dushanbe, while the crime rate in GBAO is only slightly above the national average, as follows (chart generated based on the above sources):



The authorities continued labelling informal Pamiri community leaders as leaders of criminal groups, implying that their supporters and protesters were criminals. For example, a video which was widely broadcasted and disseminated in December 2021 presented the governmental narrative of the November 2021 events. The narrator referred to the initiators of the rally after the alleged extrajudicial execution of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov as “members of a criminal group of Khorugh city and Roshtkala [district]” who called the rally “to implement their criminal goals”.⁵²

UN special rapporteurs in a joint communication to the Government of Tajikistan in March 2022 noted that Pamiri activists were “reportedly widely portrayed as criminals in the media and by public authorities.”⁵³ Several UN special procedures, in a joint communication to Tajikistan in January 2023, commented on the “overbroad and ambiguous definition of ‘terrorist actions’, ‘terrorist crimes’, and ‘terrorist organizations’” in the national legislation of Tajikistan.⁵⁴ In a reply to various communications by UN experts, in May 2023, the Tajikistani authorities reiterated the same narratives and terminology, and without providing any evidence for their claims, insisted that the abovementioned rally on 25 November 2021 had been triggered by “organized crime groups,”⁵⁵ depicted Pamiri community leaders, civil society activists and human rights defenders as forming part of “organized crime groups” and a

⁴⁸ Official text of the speech: <https://president.tj/event/speeches/16808> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). For the summary of the speech, see Radio Ozodi, “ЭМОМАЛИ Рахмон потребовал установить закон и порядок в Хоруге”, 17 September 2018, available at: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29493714.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁴⁹ Asia-plus, “ГКНБ Таджикистана разъяснил, что происходит в ГБАО”, 11 October 2018: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-pamir-gun-amnesty-masks-underlying-unease> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁵⁰ Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Database Portal, “Number of Registered Crimes, units”, <http://data.stat.tj/Home/show/251?lang=ru> (last accessed on 20 February 2024).

⁵¹ Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Database Portal, “Number of Residents, people”, <http://data.stat.tj/Home/show/266?lang=ru>, (last accessed on 20 February 2024).

⁵² Behdosht TV, НЕРУИ ҚОНУН ТВ БАДАХШОН, 9 December 2021, min. 28:50: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpvlDTzRa4> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

A Russian translation of the quotation is included in an article published by Asia-Plus which summarizes the broadcasted video: Asia-plus, “Бывший глава ГБАО Ёдгор Файзов рассказал, с чего начался митинг в Хоруге”, 10 October 2021: https://asiaplus.tj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20211210/bivshii-glava-gbao-yodgor-faizov-rasskazal-s-chego-nachalsya-miting-v-horoge?tg_rhash=dad9b8f651f186 (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁵³ Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 11 March 2022, p. 3: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27142> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁵⁴ Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 23 January 2023, p. 5: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27787> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁵⁵ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Tajikistan To The UN Office And Other International Organizations In Geneva, Information regarding the events in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR), 15 May 2023, p. 7: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=37600> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

“criminal organization”, participating in “illegal activities” and aiming to “destabilize the social and political situation” and to “orchestrate mass unrest,” and extensively and arbitrarily used the language of “terrorism”.⁵⁶

The crackdown on protesters in Rushan district of GBAO in May 2022 was officially presented as an “anti-terrorist operation.”⁵⁷ The Tajikistani delegation to the 109th Session of the UN CERD Committee on 20 April 2023 delivered that narrative to an international audience. The Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, who had personally overseen the 2021/22 crackdown in GBAO, declared:

“This situation has led to organized criminal groups to begin turning into terrorist groups. Their members became members of extremist movements. Their financing by terrorist groups and organizations from abroad was implemented actively and on all sides. Violating the principle of the sovereignty of law of the public legal order, they systematically organized mass unrest and took the law into their own hands, doing tremendous economic harm to the development of the oblast [administrative region]. This group has also engaged in the dissemination of extremist ideology of violent character.”⁵⁸

Security forces were allegedly incentivized to stage and report the successful seizure of weapons in GBAO, which again fuelled the narrative of rampant crime.⁵⁹

After the November 2021 protests, security forces coerced residents of GBAO, in particular employees of state agencies over whom they had greater leverage, to make public statements incriminating informal community leaders (see below). One Pamiri with work experience in a state agency recalls:

“[Many people] gave interviews, but they [the security forces] did not broadcast them. [...] They were [part of] a reserve, just in case international organizations inquired. [...] Before the killings [of informal community leaders], they [the security forces] prepared a base of such videos for themselves, they prepared such an alibi.”⁶⁰

In the framework of the build-up of the security and surveillance apparatus in GBAO and the ethnic deployment to GBAO,⁶¹ many ethnic Tajik members of the security forces were brought into positions of power over Pamiris (see above).

⁵⁶ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Tajikistan To The UN Office And Other International Organizations In Geneva, Information regarding the events in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR), 15 May 2023, p. 7-8: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=37600> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁵⁷ Khovar, “ПРЕСС-ЦЕНТР МВД СООБЩАЕТ: В Рущанском районе началась антитеррористическая операция”, 18 May 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/05/press-tsentr-mvd-soobshhaet-v-rushanskom-rajone-nachalas-antiterroristicheskaya-operatsiya/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁵⁸ Speech of Abdurahmon Alamshozoda, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Tajikistan, during the 2971st Meeting, 109th Session of the UN CERD Committee on 20 April 2023, min. 02:12:48: <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1v/k1v3evdxxl> (last accessed on 22 April 2023). Translation from the Russian original by the authors. He also alleged that the leaders of the so-called organized criminal groups in GBAO closely coordinated with terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, among them Al-Qaida and ISIS: min. 02:21:00.

⁵⁹ One Pamiri Ismaili interrogated by the SCNS after May 2022 recalls that the SCNS officers tried to coerce him to hand over any gun: Interview identifier #210, with the person who had been interrogated, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. Another Pamiri Ismaili reported that a security officer had tried to urge and incentivize him and other employees at their workplace to submit weapons before May 2022: Interview identifier #219, with one Pamiri Ismaili with work experience in a state institution, conducted on 3 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity. In September 2018, President Emomali Rahmon had alleged in his speech that 1,500 firearms had been confiscated in GBAO since 2013: “Речь на встрече с руководителями и активом Горно-Бадахшанской автономной области”, 15 September 2018: <https://president.tj/event/speeches/16808> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁶⁰ Interview identifier #219, with one Pamiri Ismaili with work experience in a state institution, conducted on 3 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

⁶¹ Distrusting ethnic Pamiri employees with their multiple loyalties, the security agencies increasingly deployed ethnic Tajiks from other parts of the country to GBAO to substitute ethnic Pamiri staff, in particular from 2018 onward. As a result, almost all SCNS positions and senior positions in the other security agencies in GBAO were held by ethnic Tajiks. See also ADC Memorial, Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020, 11-28 April 2023, p. 3: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/adc-memorial-cerd-109-session-tajikistan-april-2023-eng-final.pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

3. TARGETING OF PAMIRIS' INFORMAL LEADERS AND INFLUENCERS

Before 2022, many Pamiri communities had informal community leaders independent from the state administration.⁶² One of those former community leaders recalls, using the present tense to describe the past situation in the Pamirs:

“We understand that in order not to be eliminated completely, we need to unite. Each [local community] elects its leaders. We [groups of community leaders] often sit in some restaurant and analyze, drink tea [together]. [...] When they eliminate us [the leaders], the others will be like a herd of sheep, managing them will be easier.”⁶³

Since 2012, however, the authorities worked to neutralize the influence of community leaders in GBAO, who had informal authority and economic resources, in particular through a concerted campaign of intimidation since 2018. This included arbitrary detention, and also allegations of extrajudicial executions. The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, reporting on his country visit to Tajikistan in October 2023, highlighted the political character of the crackdown: “Most observers are of the view that the government crackdown is intended to stamp out political opposition and consolidate control over a restive region, usually identified with the opposition during the country’s five-year civil war.”⁶⁴

3.1 ALLEGED UNLAWFUL KILLING AND EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTION OF PAMIRI INFLUENCERS

Extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions mean the deliberate killing of individuals by order of the government or with its complicity or acquiescence. They are a crime under international law and a violation of the right to life.⁶⁵ This right is guaranteed under Article 18 of the Constitution of Tajikistan,⁶⁶ and Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Tajikistan ratified in 1999.

In the context of the persecution of the Pamiris outlined above, however, there have also been credible allegations that some influential figures have been unlawfully killed in a way, which amounts to extrajudicial executions by the security forces. Two such figures were Gulbiddin Ziyobekov and Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov.

The violent death of **Gulbiddin Ziyobekov** on 25 November 2021, was a landmark event which has prompted mass protests in GBAO to which the authorities responded with brutal and widespread reprisals against the participants and those who have pursued justice for them, which have been ongoing to this day. According to sources in contact with Gulbiddin Ziyobekov prior to his killing:

⁶² Minority Rights Group, “Pamiris in Tajikistan”, March 2023, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/pamiris/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁶³ Interview identifier #210, with a former informal leader of a local community in GBAO, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

⁶⁴ Report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Fernand de Varennes, Visit to Tajikistan, par. 66: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁶⁵ United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-executions> (last accessed on 6 August 2024).

⁶⁶ The Constitution of Tajikistan: <https://mfa.tj/en/main/tajikistan/constitution> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

“Gulbiddin was a very popular young public figure, whose authority grew not only among his fellow villagers, but also throughout his district and the entire region. He was in charge of planning local religious and customary holidays, which the authorities disliked, because they were hostile to any gathering that was not approved by them.”⁶⁷

The same source explained:

“Gulbiddin and a few of his friends defended the young woman against assistant prosecutor A. Abirzoda, whom she accused of sexually assaulting her, in February 2020. [...] Gulbiddin's public execution served as a warning to the locals that the authorities take this issue seriously and are willing to use any means necessary to crush the populace's will and spirit of resistance. Nonetheless, Gulbiddin's death sparked widespread protests in GBAO, culminating in the government launching a major crackdown on locals in May and June 2022.”⁶⁸

Gulbiddin Ziyobekov's home village, Tavdem, in the Roshtkala district, is located some 20 km to the east of the region's capital Khorugh. On 1 February 2020, he was among a group of young men who mobbed an ethnic Tajik official from the local Prosecutor's Office and demanded an apology for acting disrespectfully towards a woman. Allegedly, the official had had a conversation with a local young woman which amounted to sexual harassment.⁶⁹ Previously (in 2015), another local woman was allegedly gang raped by security officials and committed suicide. The locals complained to the authorities, but neither alleged event was investigated.

There is a publicly available video of the mobbing incident, or at least some of it.⁷⁰ In it, a group of around 10 men surround a man who later introduces himself as Abdusalom Abirzoda, assistant to the local prosecutor. Gulbiddin Ziyobekov is clearly seen among them, for most part closest to official, at one point shaking his hand, apparently shielding him from the verbal aggression by the others and once taking him by the elbow and walking him a short distance from the rest of the mob who quickly catch up. The published footage lasts four minutes and 35 seconds. It features no physical violence, and does not show how the encounter ended. The official appears intimidated but unharmed. The tension seems to mostly subside before the video ends, after he introduces himself on camera and offers apologies to the people of the region for speaking to a local woman. What happens next is unclear from the video. Fragments of footage of another indoor scene are included in a video feature produced by the authorities and broadcasted in December 2021.⁷¹ They show several dozens of people dressed in winter clothing sitting in a theatre-like venue, possibly in a government building, and one group of men arguing with each other on and in front of the stage. They raise their voices, and one unidentifiable person, whom the narrator alleges to be Ziyobekov, says “we have gone through everything, overthrow to do.” No physical violence is visible. An individual resembling Ziyobekov appears to be engaging with older men, who might be state officials, in a calm manner.⁷² Radio Ozodi (Tajik service of RFE/RL) has conducted and published a journalistic investigation into Gulbiddin Ziyobekov's killing and the events that preceded and followed it,⁷³ and the details of what it published are consistent to what is known about it, including to the team behind this report from its own sources. According to Radio Ozodi, which interviewed several eyewitnesses and confidential sources, a criminal investigation was launched into alleged use of violence against an official. Gulbiddin Ziyobekov was summoned to the Prosecutor's Office and gave a statement, but was not detained. There were no further developments in the criminal case until much later, by which time there were growing tensions between the locals and law enforcement agencies.⁷⁴

According to Radio Ozodi's sources, after 1 February 2020 Gulbiddin Ziyobekov continued to live openly in his home village Tavdem. On 25 November 2021, a group of some 10 masked armed law enforcement officers arrived at the village and tried to apprehend him at gunpoint near a local shop. They fired several shots and wounded a bystander in the leg. In response, Gulbiddin Ziyobekov tried to run away and was shot, and collapsed on a footbridge across the river. According to eyewitnesses, he was still alive when the officers approached and dragged him away. It is apparent from the eyewitnesses' accounts cited by Radio Ozodi, bystanders were too frightened to observe the event and note the details. One of the immediate eyewitnesses who was named by Radio Ozodi in its report, and who was very affirmative that Gulbiddin Ziyobekov had been alive when security officials took him away from the bridge, was himself detained and charged with violence towards a state official.⁷⁵

According to one interlocutor, who spoke with an eyewitness shortly after the incident, masked security officers shot at an unarmed Ziyobekov when he was fleeing across the bridge, Ziyobekov fell down before he had reached the middle of the bridge, masked security

⁶⁷ Interview identifier #104, with a Pamiri Ismaili person who had been in contact with Gulbiddin Ziyobekov prior to his killing, conducted on 12 February 2024 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

⁶⁸ Interview identifier #104, with a Pamiri Ismaili person who had been in contact with Gulbiddin Ziyobekov prior to his killing, conducted on 12 February 2024 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

⁶⁹ Mumin Ahmadi, Hursand Hudododov, “Что произошло в Тавдеме и Хороге: хроника событий”, Radio Ozodi, 3 December 2021: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31592468.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁷⁰ Mumin Hudododov, “Видео задержания прокурора который домогался местной девушки” [Facebook page], 25 November 2021: <https://www.facebook.com/100006404071970/videos/3140285166218228/> (last accessed on 18 April 2024).

⁷¹ Samad Salomov, “НЕРУИ ҚОНУН ТВ БАДАХШОН”, Youtube video, 9 December 2021, min. 7:00, 8:17, and 22:07: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJ-8C28S1ZE> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁷² Samad Salomov, “НЕРУИ ҚОНУН ТВ БАДАХШОН”, Youtube video, 9 December 2021, min. 7:14: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJ-8C28S1ZE> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁷³ Mumin Ahmadi, Hursand Hudododov, “Что произошло в Тавдеме и Хороге: хроника событий”, Radio Ozodi, 3 December 2021: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31592468.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁷⁴ Mumin Ahmadi, Hursand Hudododov, “Что произошло в Тавдеме и Хороге: хроника событий”, Radio Ozodi, 3 December 2021: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31592468.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁷⁵ Radio Ozodi, “В ГБАО задержан свидетель гибели Гулбиддина Зиёбекова”, 17 February 2022, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31708782.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

officers reached him and dragged him to their side of the river, while Ziybekov was shouting and trying to grab the side of the bridge to prevent himself from being dragged.⁷⁶

Less than four hours after the shooting on the bridge, the GBAO Prosecutor's Office published a statement where it claimed that Gulbiddin Ziyobekov had opened fire from an illegal handgun in his possession at the security officers who tried to apprehend him, was wounded when the fire was returned, dying later of his wounds, and that the handgun was later recovered on the site.⁷⁷ Direct eyewitnesses interviewed by Radio Ozodi did not confirm this. One of the witnesses, a local villager, who co-signed the official report that documented the discovery of the handgun is quoted by Radio Ozodi as saying that he did so out of fear, and that the handgun was brought to the site later.⁷⁸

According to the statement by the GBAO Prosecutor's Office, Gulbiddin Ziyobekov had been on a wanted list and repeatedly ignored summons for questioning by the investigating agencies. This is contradicted by the official summons letter requesting him to report to the State National Security Committee (GKNB) on 26 November 2021,⁷⁹ reportedly the only one he had received, to which he had no chance of ignoring, having been killed on 25 November 2021. The statement claims that he was wanted for taking hostage A. Abirzoda, assistant to the local prosecutor, on 1 February 2020, and beating and torturing him for eight hours. It is extremely unlikely that in the case of an alleged crime as serious as this one the authorities would have not attempted to immediately detain the suspect (which they could have done during his questioning mentioned above) but rather let him walk free for almost 22 months.

The timing and immediate cause of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov's death have been widely contested, but all independently available evidence points to an unlawful killing, and possibly an extrajudicial execution. All public demands for an effective investigation, and the initiatives set up to try and ensure it, have been blocked by the authorities, and those who were active participants in these initiatives arbitrarily prosecuted themselves (see below on the Commission of 44).

The statement by the GBAO Prosecutor's Office mentions that he was wounded, but does not mention his death. Several eyewitnesses (as above) reported that he was taken away wounded but likely still alive. A short video was published on Facebook account Bomdod TV on 23 December 2021; the video "was sent" to the account (presumably anonymously).⁸⁰ The video, showing several persons dragging something or somebody across the bridge in Tavdem, was geo-located by Amnesty International's Evidence Lab. However, the footage is too blurry to make a reliable conclusion whether they were dragging a living person.

Gulbiddin Ziyobekov's body was subsequently delivered to the morgue in Khorugh. One of those individuals who collected it from the morgue recalls:

"There were around 25 or 30 persons [in the morgue]. I entered, he [Ziyobekov] was covered with some kind of shroud. I realized that there was already blood everywhere around him. When [somebody] took away the shroud, [...] [I saw that] his head was red from blood. Under one eye there was such a hole from a bullet. [...] I was shocked, I was in a condition of shock. I made the conclusion for myself that they had killed him 100 percent. [...] Later I was told [by people from Roshtkala district] how he had been killed. They shot at him on the bridge. They beat him on the bridge. They took him away. When they pushed his wounded and beaten body into the vehicle, at that time he was still alive. [...] They first took him to the military base [in Khorugh], later his corpse was taken to the morgue. [...] It is very probable that the bullet in his eye was fired later. If it had immediately been shot in the eye, he would hardly have survived. People who were present at that moment [when he was pushed into the vehicle] definitively told me that he was still alive when they tried to push him into the vehicle. He was screaming all the time. This is an indication that he was still alive."⁸¹

On the basis of the photos published after Ziyobekov's death and allegedly showing his body in the morgue,⁸² a forensic pathologist consulted by Amnesty International's Evidence Lab commented that there was "a gunshot entry wound at the medial canthus (corner) of the right eye... which would have been essentially immediately fatal." There are numerous cuts on different parts of the body, and several haematomas on his shaved head.

After four days of street protests in Khorugh in response to Gulbiddin Ziyobekov's death, the authorities promised, amongst other things, a prompt and effective investigation into the circumstances of his killing, following which the protesters agreed to disperse.⁸³ During these protests, civil society activists formed a group known as the Commission of 44 to monitor the investigation and to liaise with the authorities. Despite their frequent calls to implement the promised investigation and to hold accountable anyone found

⁷⁶ Interview identifier #103, with a Pamiri Ismaili person who had talked to the eyewitness shortly before, conducted on 26 November 2021 by phone on condition of anonymity.

⁷⁷ Khovar, Пресс-центр прокуратуры ГБАО сообщает, 25 November 2021: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2021/11/press-tsentr-prokuratury-gbao-soobshhaet/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁷⁸ Mumin Ahmadi, Hursand Hudododov, "Что произошло в Тавдеме и Хоруге: хроника событий", Radio Ozodi, 3 December 2021: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31592468.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁷⁹ Copy of the letter, dated 25 November 2021, seen by the research team.

⁸⁰ Bomdod TV, "МОМЕНТ ЗАДЕРЖАНИЯ ГУЛЬБИДДИНА ЗИЁБЕКОВА В СЕЛЕ ТАВДЕМ", 23 December 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOZ4DWAZP64> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁸¹ Interview identifier #211, with a participant of the rally on 25 November 2021, conducted on 15 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

⁸² Images of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov's dead body are available here <https://t.me/pamirinside/356>, <https://t.me/pamirnews04/2722>, <https://t.me/pamirnews04/2732> (last accessed on 19 April 2024).

⁸³ RFE/RL's Tajik Service, "Protests End In Volatile Tajik Region After Talks Between Officials And Demonstrators", 28 November 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-protests-gorno-badakhshan/31583857.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

responsible for the alleged unlawful killing,⁸⁴ the investigation's results have never been made public, and the investigators avoided effective cooperation with civil society representatives.⁸⁵ In January 2022 the Commission of 44 noted that no criminal proceedings had been instituted in relation to the death, and instead leading members of the Commission were themselves subsequently detained, prosecuted and imprisoned under arbitrary terrorism-related and other charges (see section 4.6.1 below).⁸⁶

UN special rapporteurs in a joint communication to the Government of Tajikistan requested information on the factual and legal basis for the special operation in Tavdem.⁸⁷ In a summary response to various communications by UN special rapporteurs, without providing any evidence, the Tajikistani authorities claimed that Ziyobekov had, jointly with unnamed accomplices:

“kidnapped and beat three officials of the law enforcement agencies [...] then took two of them hostage and made demands to the authorities for their release... [...] On 25 November 2021, the law enforcement agencies carried out a special operation to arrest Mr. Ziyobekov, who had been charged with especially serious offences. He put up armed resistance, was wounded by return fire and died on the way to hospital.”⁸⁸

Colonel Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov, born in 1963, a field commander of local militia during the civil war, and later, under the postwar reconciliation agreement, a commanding officer in the border troops, was an influential Pamiri Ismaili community leader residing in the neighbourhood of Bar Khorugh. Following the protests in November 2021 and the growing societal tension, the authorities initiated criminal proceedings against him accusing him of violence towards a state official in January 2022, insulting him and spreading social enmity (which he denied).⁸⁹ Rumours spread that the authorities were preparing a security operation to kill or arrest him, particularly after the authorities visibly increased the presence of security forces in Khorugh and disabled the internet. Anonymous sources were cited on social media alleging that a special operation aiming to capture or kill Mamadbokirov was planned by the security service's leadership in capital Dushanbe in February 2022.⁹⁰ In response, local people organized public vigils in locations across Khorugh where they suspected a security operation could be attempted by the authorities.⁹¹ On 4 March 2022, road police officers reportedly attempted to stop and then shot at his car and injured his hand, although a senior police official denied the shooting and stated that Mamadbokirov was unharmed and at his home.⁹²

Mamadbokirov played a major role in organizing the protest march in Khorugh on 16 May 2022 and was afterwards accused by the authorities of being the head of an organized criminal group and having organized a demonstration “with the goal of disturbing the public order, intimidating the population and influencing government organs to take decisions in the interest of people involved in illegal criminal activities”.⁹³ After the protest march on 16 May 2022 was dispersed by security forces, residents of Bar Khorugh blocked the roads leading to their neighbourhood to prevent an attack by the security forces.

Mamadbokirov was shot and killed in the streets of Khorugh, by gunmen who arrived in a pickup vehicle, on 22 May 2022.⁹⁴ According to the authorities, his death was as a result of a turf war between criminal groups.⁹⁵ Many members of the Pamiri Ismaili community,

⁸⁴ For example, the Commission of 44 published video statements addressed to Chairman of the National Assembly of Tajikistan (<https://t.me/pamirinside/248>, last accessed on 22 August 2024), President Rahmon (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZftw_MO4, last accessed on 22 August 2024) and the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1033776230817454>, last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁸⁵ In a video broadcasted on state TV on 9 December 2021, the authorities smeared and prejudged Ziyobekov: Eurasianet, “Tajikistan: Authorities go back on their word in deal with GBAO residents. State TV has smeared the victim of a police shooting as a hotheaded vigilante”, 10 December 2021: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-authorities-go-back-on-their-word-in-deal-with-gbao-residents> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). The Commission of 44 criticized in January 2022 that no criminal proceedings had been started in relation to the death of Ziyobekov. In February 2022, Radio Ozodi reported that investigators from the Office of the General Prosecutor were present in GBAO and had exhumed Ziyobekov's body: Mirzonabi Holikzod, “Вы провели эксгумацию тела моего сына, и что дальше?” Мать Гулбиддина Зиёбекова требует ответа”, Radio Ozodi, 1 February 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31681132.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). In May 2022, the same media outlet reported that the investigators had left GBAO and that no result of the investigation had been communicated: Mirzonabi Holikzod, “Гражданские активисты ГБАО: убийство Зиёбекова может остаться нераскрытым”, Radio Ozodi, 3 May 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31832611.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁸⁶ International Federation for Human Rights (fidh), “Tajikistan: Heavy prison sentences for rights defenders from Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous region”, 19 December 2022: <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/tajikistan-heavy-prison-sentences-for-rights-defenders-from-gorno> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁸⁷ Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs' joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 11 March 2022, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27142> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁸⁸ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Tajikistan to The UN Office And Other International Organizations In Geneva, Information regarding the events in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR), 15 May 2023, pp. 6-7: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=37600> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁸⁹ Asia-plus, “Начальник Управления образования ГБАО: «Мухаммадбокир избил меня». Мухаммадбокиров: «Это ложь и клевета»”, 2 February 2022: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/laworder/20220202/nachalnik-upravleniya-obrazovaniya-gbao-bokir-izbil-menya-bokir-ei-bogu-vryot> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁹⁰ Telegram Messenger, Pamirinside, 4 February 2022: <https://t.me/pamirinside/391> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁹¹ Ramziya Mirzobekova, “Что происходит в Хоруге прямо сейчас?”, Asia-plus, 7 February 2022: https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20220207/cto-proishodit-v-horoge-priamo-seichas?tg_rhash=dad9b8f651f186 (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁹² The authorities claimed that the shots had been fired into the air and denied any injuries: Radio Ozodi, “Махмадбокиров: ‘Пуля попала в руку, не задев кость’. УМВД: ‘Гашиники стреляли в воздух’”, 4 March 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31735909.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁹³ Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, newsflash on 15 May 2022 (original report at <https://www.vkd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34065-valorati-kor-oi-dokhil-khabar-medi-ad-2> no longer available; text accessible on <http://web.archive.org/web/20220517065120/https://www.vkd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34065-valorati-kor-oi-dokhil-khabar-medi-ad-2> as of 22 August 2024).

⁹⁴ The killing of Mamadbokirov on 22 May 2022 was described by various media, referring to sources in Khorugh: Eurasianet, “Tajikistan: Local residents say Pamiri leader killed by government troops”, 22 May 2022: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-local-residents-say-pamiri-leader-killed-by-government-troops> (last accessed on 22 August 2024); Radio Ozodi, “В Хоруге убит Мамадбокир Мамадбокиров”, 22 May 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31862351.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024), Anora Sarkorova's Telegram channel, 23 May 2022: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/44> (last accessed on 22 August 2024), Suzanne Levi-Sanchez, “The assassination that shook the Pamir Mountains to the core”, *OpenDemocracy*, 3 August 2022: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/gorno-badakhshan-mamadboqirov-tajikistan-pamir-mountains/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁹⁵ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Tajikistan To The UN Office And Other International Organizations In Geneva, Information regarding the events in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR), 15 May 2023, p. 9: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=37600> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

however, including eyewitnesses, strongly contest this account and insist that he was extrajudicially executed by members of the security forces.⁹⁶ One eyewitness reported:

“Mamadbokir was on his way to the Boyni neighbourhood with a crowd of people who followed him without his request, seeing what was going on. [...] Suddenly a black pickup truck appeared at full speed, they cut across Mamadbokir's path. Four armed Alpha troops [special force of the SCNS] got out of the vehicle. Frightened, the people dispersed, only one guy was left with him. [...] I clearly saw the first bullet hit Mamadbokir in the stomach, the person trying to cover him with his body got hit in the arm, and then they both [...] fell down. The next bullet was fired at Mamadbokir's head and immediately the four armed silhouettes got into the pickup vehicle and rushed away.”⁹⁷

Another eye-witness did not see the moment of shooting but the aftermath:

“There were shots. It was very close. I rushed [to the site]. We [me and my relative] saw bodies. [...] My [relative] went there [to the bodies] and said that they might need help. Later [that relative] told me by phone that it was Bokir [who had been killed] [...] and that they had shot him directly into the head. [...] I saw a black car. There was a driver and [at least] two persons in the back. [...] It was not a truck, but it was a big vehicle. [...] This kind of cars they have in the SCNS. I regularly pass by the SCNS office. They do have those cars, only they and the hunters have them. [...] The car was driving towards the centre of the town. They had guns, they were armed. Their faces were covered with black masks, or with something else. [...] Two hours later, they said on TV that Bokir had been killed. They did not say anything about the SCNS, [they said] that there had [just] been some animosity. We all knew it [anyway], the SCNS had been tracking him so [much], the SCNS had shot at his car, everybody knew.”⁹⁸

Mamadbokirov had expected such turn of events, as testified by a Pamiri Ismaili who was friends with one of his relatives and during their meeting sometime in spring 2022 that relative:

“... was crying and said ‘We are so tired, they [the security forces] do not let us live in peace. [...] He [Mamadbokirov] knows that something is going to happen soon, [...] today or tomorrow. [...] He does not sleep at home. He says it is better [for safety reasons] if nobody is around [him]. He does not want even us to visit him.’”⁹⁹

On the day of Mamadbokirov's death, the MIA announced a preliminary investigation.¹⁰⁰ However, at the time of writing the authorities had not presented any findings nor identified any suspects. In the meantime, the authorities have widely referred to Mamadbokirov as a known criminal guilty of numerous violent crimes, despite him having never been convicted of these, and used dehumanizing language. Thus, the Minister of Justice referred to Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov in front of a UN human rights body as “this person, if you can call him a human at all.”¹⁰¹

Other deaths in contested circumstances during security operations following the killing of Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov include Yodgor Gulomkhaidarov and four other men in Rushan district, killed on 31 May 2022,¹⁰² and Khursand Mazorov and Zoir Rajabov in Khorugh, killed on 12 June 2022.¹⁰³ The official reports on their killings make similar claims that these individuals had been guilty of violent crimes, had refused to give themselves up to the authorities, put up armed resistance in response to an attempt to apprehend them in the course of “anti-terrorist operations”, and were shot dead when the fire was returned. There are no independent accounts of the circumstances of their deaths, and the authorities disabled all internet communications within and with GBAO at the time.

3.2 ARBITRARY DETENTIONS AMONG THE INFORMAL LEADERSHIP

Subsequently, the security forces targeted the informal leadership on all levels and people who had influence among their respective peer groups and were able to mobilize for collective action. Starting with the top level of high-profile informal power brokers like Tolib

⁹⁶ Suzanne Levi-Sanchez, “The Assassination that Shook the Pamir Mountains to the Core”, 3 August 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/gorno-badakhshan-mamadboqirov-tajikistan-pamir-mountains/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

⁹⁷ Interview identifier #102, with an eyewitness, conducted on 4 February 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

⁹⁸ Interview identifier #222, with a Pamiri Ismaili living in Khorugh during the first months of 2022, conducted on 13 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

⁹⁹ Interview identifier #222, with a Pamiri Ismaili living in Khorugh during the first months of 2022, conducted on 13 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

¹⁰⁰ Khovar citing the Press Centre of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, 22 May 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/05/zayavlenie-press-tsentra-upravleniya-ministerstva-vnutrennih-del-po-gbao/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁰¹ Speech of Muzaffar Ashuriyon, Minister of Justice of Tajikistan, during the 2972nd Meeting, 109th Session of the UN CERD Committee on 21 April 2023, min. 01:06:08: <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1w/k1wqhs4v8g> (last accessed on 22 April 2023, recording no longer available online). Translation from the Russian original by the authors.

¹⁰² Radio Ozodi, “В результате продолжающейся “операции” в Рушане убиты пять человек, задержан житель Вамара”, 31 May 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31876653.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024); report by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, 31 May 2022 (accessed at the time on <https://www.vkd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34162-khabari-markazi-matbuoti-vkd-t-az-nati-ai-amalijoti-zidditerrorist-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-2> but no longer available).

¹⁰³ Khovar, “Межведомственный штаб по обеспечению безопасности и общественного порядка в ГБАО сообщает”, 12 June 2022:

<https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/06/mezhvedomstvennyj-shtab-po-obespecheniyu-bezopasnosti-i-obshhestvennogo-poryadka-v-gbao-soobshhaet-2> (last accessed on 22 August 2024); Radio Ozodi, “Зoir Раджабов и Хурсанд Мазоров ‘нейтрализованы’ в ходе спецоперации в Хороре”, 13 June 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31894874.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

Ayombekov,¹⁰⁴ they proceeded to detain community leaders and youth leaders who enjoyed authority and were influential within certain villages or neighbourhoods, as well as volunteer activists and successful athletes.¹⁰⁵

In May 2022, security forces arbitrarily detained, as suspects under politically motivated charges, respected civil society representatives and human rights defenders with legal expertise and access to international media. The most prominent cases were the journalist and activist Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva,¹⁰⁶ as well as the lawyers Faromuz Irgashev,¹⁰⁷ and Manuchehr Kholiknazarov.¹⁰⁸ Their cases were addressed in several communications by the special procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UN HRC) to the Government of Tajikistan. In their joint communication of 12 May 2023 to the Tajikistani authorities, for example, a group of six special rapporteurs and two UN working groups expressed their “utmost concern at the criminalisation and sentencing – in some cases to long terms, exceeding ten years – of the human rights defenders mentioned”. They also expressed concern at the human rights defenders’ alleged arbitrary arrests and detentions, at reported instances of torture and ill-treatment, including in order to extract false confessions, and about “the apparent pattern of using extremism- and terrorism-related charges against human rights defenders and minority activists, particularly those defending the rights of the Pamiri minority, allegedly to discredit them and justify further secrecy around their cases”. Noting also fair trial concerns, the group concludes that: “All this, together with the use of heavy sentences, sends a clear and chilling message to human rights defenders in Tajikistan to cease work or face heavy penalties, and results in a serious shrinking of civic space in the country.”¹⁰⁹

Pamiri Ismaili businesspeople who had provided material resources to support protests, e.g. food or firewood for cooking, were detained in summer 2022.¹¹⁰ The crackdown on the cultural elites and opinion influencers did not only target critical bloggers like Komyor Mirzoyev¹¹¹ and Mamadsulton Mavlnozardov¹¹², but also activists who had promoted Pamiri identity and the revival of Pamiri languages, such as activists Khushruz Jumaev¹¹³ and Muzaffar Muborakshoev.¹¹⁴ The popular poet and musician Shirinsho Masumov (Sash Zaifi), who had produced songs in one of the Pamiri languages, touching social and political issues, fled the country for fear of detention,¹¹⁵ as did the writer and activist Khudobakh Khudobakhov who had written a book in one of the Pamiri languages.¹¹⁶ A renowned Ismaili cleric, Muzaffar Davlatmirov, was detained in July 2022, and already in August 2022 sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for alleged

¹⁰⁴ He was detained 11 June 2022 and instantly flown to Dushanbe on a helicopter, according to official report published by Khovar on 11 June 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/06/mezhvedomstvennyj-shtab-po-obespecheniyu-bezopasnosti-i-obshchestvennogo-poryadka-v-gbao-soobshhaet/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024); see also Radio Ozodi, “В Хоргое задержаны Толиб Аёмбеков, Мунаввар Шанбиев и Ниёзшо Гулобов. Власти называют их ‘лидерами ОПГ’”, 11 June 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31893774.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). Later sentenced to life imprisonment: Radio Ozodi, “Толиб Аёмбеков и Мунаввар Шанбиев приговорены к пожизненному заключению”, 23 November 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32145349.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁰⁵ For a synopsis of publicly available information on detentions, see compilation by the initiative Roof-top Info, *What is happening in Tajikistan?*, 7 March 2024: <https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/file/background-information-on-the-situation-in-kh/download/Background-information-on-the-situation-in-Khorugh.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). Additionally, the authors of the report have collected information on detentions for confidential reporting (due to the sensitivity of sources), since November 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Partnership of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), “Tajikistan: Arbitrary detention of prominent human rights defender Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva”, 31 May 2022: <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/arbitrary-detention-of-prominent-human-rights-defender-ulfatkhonim-mamadshoeva> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁰⁷ Lawyers for Lawyers, “Statement on the arrest of the lawyers Manuchehr Kholiknazarov and Faromuz Irgashev”, 31 October 2022: <https://lawyersforlawyers.org/en/statement-on-the-arrest-of-the-lawyers-manuchehr-kholiknazarov-and-faromuz-irgashov/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁰⁸ International Federation for Human Rights (ifhr), “Tajikistan: Arbitrary detention of lawyers Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, Faromuz Irgashev and Khursand Mamadshoev”, 15 June 2022: <https://www.ifhr.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/tajikistan-arbitrary-detention-of-lawyers-manuchehr-kholiknazarov> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁰⁹ Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 12 May 2023: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=28026>. There had already been other communications on several of these cases before: Joint address to the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, 13 July 2022:

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27423>, and on 4 October 2022: Joint address to the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Special Rapporteur on minority issues and the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism:

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27560>. In response to these and other communications, the Tajikistani authorities submitted information on the situation in GBAO to OHCHR in May 2023, depicting Mamadshoeva, Kholiknazarov and Irgashev as part of a conspiracy against the state, pp. 7-9: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=37600> (all sources last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹⁰ Pamir Inside, “В Хоргое задержан очередной предприниматель Тохир Абдолбеков”, 16 November 2022: <https://pamirinside.org/в-хоргое-задержан-очередной-предприниматель> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹¹ Radio Ozodi, “В Москве задержан уроженец ГБАО блогер Комёр Мирзоев”, 6 September 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32020990.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). Later sentenced to 10 years in prison: Telegram Messenger, Anora Sarkorova, „СУД В ДУШАНБЕ ПРИГОВОРИЛ К 10 ГОДАМ ТЮРЕМНОГО ЗАКЛЮЧЕНИЯ ПАМИРСКОГО ВОЛОНТЕРА И БЛОГЕРА КОМЁРА МИРЗОЕВА”, <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/550> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹² Radio Ozodi, “В Душанбе задержали экс-сотрудника госбезопасности, критиковавшего главу ГКНБ Таджикистана”, 17 June 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31901645.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). Later sentenced to seven years in prison: Radio Ozodi, “Журналист и полковник госбезопасности Мухаммади Султон приговорен к 7 годам колонии”, 13 September 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32031817.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹³ CPJ, “Tajikistan authorities detain Pamiri journalists Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva and Khushruz Jumayev for More than 2 Months”, 11 August 2022:

<https://cpj.org/2022/08/tajikistan-authorities-detain-pamiri-journalists-ulfatkhonim-mamadshoeva-and-khushruz-jumayev-for-more-than-2-months/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). His case was addressed in a communication by UN special rapporteurs to the Government of Tajikistan: Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 12 May 2023: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=28026> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹⁴ ADC Memorial, “Five stories about Pamir and the Pamiris”, 26 January 2023: <https://adcmemorial.org/en/articles/five-stories-about-pamir-and-the-pamiris/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹⁵ Telegram Messenger, Pamirinside, 2 January 2023, <https://t.me/pamirinside/1638> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹⁶ Radio Ozodi, “Зиндагӣ аз нав ца суд сар - китобе барои наҷоти забоне аз марғ ВИДЕО”, 18 November 2017: <https://www.ozodi.org/a/pamiri-book-tajikistan-badakhshan-languages-asia/28859616.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). According to a wanted list publicly displayed at the façade of a building MIA in Khorugh, of which the Amnesty International research team has reviewed a video recorded between autumn 2022 and summer 2023, Khudobakhshov was wanted for alleged use of violence against a state representative (Article 328 Par. 2 of the Criminal Code).

public calls for extremist activities (Art. 307(1) Criminal Code), while no further information about the specific accusations and the evidence against him was made public.¹¹⁷

Throughout 2022, the security agencies of Tajikistan cracked down on the leadership of the Pamiri diaspora in the Russian Federation in apparent cooperation or collusion with security agencies of the host country. The most prominent incidents of transnational repression were the abductions of Amriddin Alovatshoev in January 2022, who was kept in incommunicado custody for several weeks after arrival in Dushanbe,¹¹⁸ and of Oraz Vazirbekov and Ramzi Vazirbekov (not related) in July 2022.¹¹⁹

Detained individuals were sentenced to long prison terms mostly in closed trials, without due process and often without legal representation (see section 4.6 below).

¹¹⁷ Forum 18, “Tajikistan: Ismaili Religious Leader Jailed, Prayer Houses Closed”, 17 October 2022: https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782 (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹⁸ Forcibly disappeared in the Russian Federation on 11 January 2022, reappeared in custody in Dushanbe after several weeks: Asia-Plus, “Tajik authorities confirm detention and extradition of Alovatshoyev to Tajikistan”, 2 February 2022: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/node/308131> (last accessed on 22 August 2024); HRW, “Tajikistan: Restore Internet in Autonomous Region, Ensure Fair Trial for Activist from the Area Forcibly Returned from Russia”, 7 February 2022: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/07/tajikistan-restore-internet-autonomous-region> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). Later sentenced to 18 years in prison: Mirzonabi Holikzod, “‘Аловатшоева судили по пяти статьям’. Близкие активиста молодежи ГБАО требуют пересмотра приговора”, Radio Ozodi, 6 May 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31836352.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹¹⁹ Abducted from Moscow Domodedovo Airport on 29 July 2022 and reappeared in custody in Dushanbe shortly afterwards: Catherine Putz, “Pair of Pamiri Activists Disappear From Russia and Reappear in Tajikistan”, The Diplomat, 3 August 2022: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/pair-of-pamiri-activists-disappear-from-russia-and-reappear-in-tajikistan/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). Oraz Vazirbekov was later sentenced to 16 years in prison: RFE/RL’s Tajik Service, “Tajik Activist Sentenced To 16 Years In Prison For ‘Extremism’”, 7 November 2022: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-activist-vazirbekov-prison-16-years/32118861.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). Ramzi Vazirbekov was sentenced to 13 years in prison: Mirzonabi Holikzod, “В Душанбе гражданского активиста Рамзи Вазирбекова приговорили к 13 годам колонии”, 8 November 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32120926.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

4. ARBITRARY TARGETING OF ORDINARY PAMIRI ISMAILIS FOR HARASSMENT, VIOLENCE, PROSECUTION AND IMPRISONMENT

Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees that: “Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law.” Similarly, Article 19 of the Constitution of Tajikistan states that: “No one may be detained and arrested without legal grounds.”¹²⁰

Apart from unlawful killings and arbitrary arrests targeting community leaders and other influential figures, the security forces deployed in GBAO have also targeted ordinary Pamiris. They have used law enforcement, investigative authorities, and the judiciary to harass, intimidate and jail Pamiris.

4.1 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Racial discrimination and gender-based discrimination and oppression intersected when male Tajik officers of security agencies and state officials deployed in GBAO interacted with female Pamiri Ismaili civilians. A member of the research team had conversations with many Pamiri women in Tajikistan, who shared that they had experienced gender-based violence and harassment, but none agreed to be quoted anonymously or otherwise.

According to one Pamiri Ismaili man who had spent several years living in Dushanbe, the extortion of sexual favours by security officers was a common phenomenon in the capital:

“If a [Tajik or Pamiri] girl goes to the police [office] without her brother or father, they immediately suggest a relationship. [...] In Dushanbe they make such suggestions shamelessly [...] but in the Pamirs it does not work like this. [...] Any girl, if they [security officers] like her, they suggest her a relationship and in exchange solve her problem. [...] There was one girl [in Dushanbe], she had lost her phone and went to the police station. He [the police officer] said: ‘You should keep company with me and I will find your phone.’ She left and told me about it, that was around 2020. Everybody knows, many such incidents.”¹²¹

One former MIA employee not related to the events in GBAO, interviewed for this report, confirmed that sexual violence by police officers was generally widespread, widely known and tolerated by the superior officers or perpetrated by them. As an example, he

¹²⁰ The Constitution of Tajikistan, <https://mfa.tj/en/main/view/70/constitution-of-the-republic-of-tajikistan> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹²¹ Interview identifier #231, with a Pamir Ismaili who had spent several years living in Dushanbe, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

recalled an instance when the wife of a detainee came to the police station. According to him, the other police officers touched her buttocks and threatened her husband that they would rape her in front of him.”¹²²

One human rights defender in exile explained that gender-based violence was a countrywide phenomenon but had a specific dimension in GBAO, with Tajik security officers showing their powers of control over Pamiri Ismailis and their civil society by exercising gender-based violence against Pamiri women.

“It is mainly young men who are leaving. Khorugh is full of young women and there is practically nobody who can defend them. Sexual harassment is so crazy all over Tajikistan, I have heard of so many cases in which they [security officers] created [legal] problems and asked for sexual favours to solve them. In GBAO, the [Tajik] security officers are particularly keen on it. Pamiri women are relatively progressive and wear clothes in European style, that’s why they [security officers] think they are easily accessible. [...] They also know that Pamiri guys used to defend their women in the past. Now they can demonstrate that they have finally full power over them [Pamiri girls] and that they [Pamiri guys] cannot do anything. So, there are animalistic desire and political demonstration [of power].”¹²³

The same interlocutor emphasized the challenges with collecting reliable data about sexual harassment and gender-based violence:

“People don’t talk about it because it would backfire from both sides, from the state and from the society. The guys are still quite patriarchal and the girl would end up being alone forever. [...] It is a countrywide issue, it might be widespread everywhere, but in GBAO it can be understood and [the survivor] protected...”¹²⁴

The interlocutor was referring to such attitudes and customs in GBAO, where the survivor might talk about an incident, and as exemplified by Gulbiddin Ziyobekov and his fellow male villagers when they forced the alleged perpetrator to apologize for his actions in relation to a local woman (see above). For example, female journalist Anora Sarkorova, a Pamiri in exile, wrote about this event as a positive example of Pamiri men responding to gender-based violence and harassment after the police, the Prosecutor’s Office and the local administration failed to take any action. She also stressed that Gulbiddin Ziyobekov’s killing was the authorities’ direct revenge for his actions.¹²⁵

After the violent crackdown by security forces in response to the protests of May 2022, Pamiri women were left even more vulnerable to such practices while male Tajik officers from law enforcement agencies could act with full impunity. They reportedly boasted that they could now do with Pamiri women whatever they wanted and that Pamiri men could not protect them anymore.¹²⁶

After May 2022, security officers, among them high-ranking ones, reportedly used threats of fabricating criminal charges as leverage to rape and commit other acts of gender-based violence against Pamiri women.¹²⁷ One anonymous subscriber of the Telegram channel of journalist Anora Sarkorova in July 2022 reported sexual harassment and coercion of female employees of state institutions in GBAO, particularly in schools, by officers of security agencies. Sarkorova’s source elaborated on the example of three female bank employees who had rejected such sexual advances and been told by an officer of the SCNS: “Now you will not get far with your caprices. We can do whatever we like. Nobody can tell us anything.”¹²⁸ According to Sarkorova, such sexual harassment and coercion of state employees had become a “widespread practice” in GBAO, judging by the number of reports she had received.¹²⁹

4.2 SURVEILLANCE AND INFRINGEMENT ON PRIVACY

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights states that: “The right to privacy is central to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights online and offline. It serves as one of the foundations of a democratic society and plays a key role for the realization of a broad spectrum of human rights, including in the digital sphere, ranging from freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, access and enjoyment of economic and social rights. Interference with the right to privacy can also have a disproportionate impact on certain individuals and/or groups, thus exacerbating inequality and discrimination.”¹³⁰

Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on their honour and reputation. It further states

¹²² Interview identifier #233, with a former MIA employee, conducted on 25 April 2024 by a video call on condition of anonymity.

¹²³ Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri Ismaili human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

¹²⁴ Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

¹²⁵ Telegram Messenger, Anora Sarkorova, May 25 2022, <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/56> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). According to the independent news portal Asia-Plus, the coercion of the alleged perpetrator happened in February 2020: Asia-Plus, “Protest rally held in Khorog following killing of resident of Roshtqala district by law enforcement officers”, 25 November 2021: <https://www.asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/incidents/20211125/protest-rally-held-in-khorog-following-killing-of-resident-of-roshhtqala-district-by-law-enforcement-officers> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹²⁶ Interview identifier #210, with a Pamiri man who had been interrogated by members of security agencies in GBAO after May 2023, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. According to journalist Anora Sarkorova, who had published a report on sexual harassment of Pamiri women by security officers in June 2022 (<https://t.me/anorasarkorova/152>, last accessed on 22 August 2024), the security officers had expressed a similar view to Pamiri men trying to defend the women: Interview with Anora Sarkorova, conducted on 15 and 18 May 2023 via video call.

¹²⁷ Interview identifier #213, with a Pamiri man who had heard about one security officer committing acts of sexual violence from several sources in Khorugh, conducted on 19 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹²⁸ Telegram Messenger, Anora Sarkorova, July 22, 2022, <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/359>.

¹²⁹ Interview with Anora Sarkorova, conducted on 15 and 18 May 2023 via video call.

¹³⁰ United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner (OHCHR), International Standards, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/privacy-in-the-digital-age/international-standards> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

that “everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.” While the right to privacy under international human rights law is not absolute, any instance of interference must be provided by law and subject to a careful and critical assessment of its necessity and proportionality to achieve one of the permissible aims under international human rights law, such as law enforcement or national security, and the interference must be the least intrusive method possible to achieve the government’s legitimate aim.

In spite of these obligations the security forces have infringed on citizens’ right to privacy while allegedly combating organized crime, and have reinforced electronic and in-person surveillance to control and intimidate the Pamiri population, particularly in Khorugh, complementing an increasingly refined countrywide surveillance system.

After the protests in November 2021, following the death of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov (see section 4.1 above), the authorities gradually expanded the video surveillance infrastructure in Khorugh.¹³¹ Surveillance cameras were set up along the main road, in strategically important locations like the city park and the centre of Bar Khorugh neighbourhood.¹³² In April 2023, the MIA in GBAO in a Facebook post wrote about its Safe City Video Surveillance Center:

*“This centralized hub hosts all surveillance cameras, overseeing and recording any breaches or illicit activities within the city. With these cameras effectively monitoring traffic and individuals, regular safety checks are ensured.”*¹³³ Pictures of the surveillance screen in the Video Surveillance Center published by the MIA indicate that a system of the Chinese company HIK Vision was used. While the MIA justified the surveillance system with road safety, apart from roads, also the main square in front of the city administration, the square in front of the city park were monitored, and a camera installed close to the Botanical Garden allowed to monitor Bar Khorugh neighbourhood from above.¹³⁴ It is unknown whether the SCNS has access to the surveillance data as well and whether facial recognition is applied.

In the first half of 2022, there were reports of surveillance drones continuously circling over several neighbourhoods of Khorugh and taking high-resolution pictures in a form of surveillance previously unprecedented in Tajikistan. For example, one Khorugh resident who had participated in a peaceful protest event and was later interrogated recalls:

“The drones were monitoring the town day and night. [...] They were flying at an altitude of [approximately] 20 meters. [...] They [interrogating security officers] said ‘Confess [your participation in the event].’ [...] They presented me a photo on a big monitor. [...] First the picture showed [the scene of the event from above], then they zoomed in so that the face of a guy and the numbers of a car could be recognized.”¹³⁵

Various organizations and enterprises like banks, restaurants and hotels were incentivized or coerced to set up surveillance cameras at the entrance of their buildings and to keep the recordings available in case the law enforcement agencies requested them. In particular, all entrances of the prayer and community house (Jamatkhana), the main place of Ismaili worship, in Khorugh were under video surveillance.¹³⁶

The security forces are widely believed to geolocate target persons by means of their mobile SIM cards.¹³⁷ They also seem to have had access to databases of mobile phones in Russia, as indicated by the testimony of one Pamiri man who was targeted in early 2022 while in Moscow:

“After relocation to another place, I threw away my SIM card and bought a new one. I did not register that SIM card on my name. Within hours, I got another phone call [from a security officer]. [An acquaintance with work experience in one of the security agencies in Tajikistan] told me that the phone was registered on my name and that this is how they might have found me. Indeed, when I had bought that smartphone – it was an expensive one – in Russia, I had left my passport [data] and my address.”¹³⁸

In conversations with the research team, many Pamiris assumed that security forces routinely intercepted phone calls and were able to intercept communications via messenger applications on smartphones. In February 2023, the authorities in Tajikistan started obligatory registration of the IMEI numbers and owners of mobile phones,¹³⁹ creating the preconditions for more pervasive surveillance of electronic communication and tracking of individuals.

¹³¹ Minority Rights Groups, “Military crackdown in Tajikistan: another step backwards for Pamiri minority rights and towards potential conflict”, 20 May 2022: <https://minorityrights.org/2022/05/20/tajikistan-crackdown/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹³² Interview identifier #301, with a person who visited GBAO in summer 2022, conducted on 18 June 2023 via video call.

¹³³ Раёсати ВҚД дар вилояти Хатлон, “Рӯзи дарҳои кушод”: хонандагони муассисаҳои таълимии Шугнон аз фаъолияти милитсияи шинос гардиданд, Facebook Post, April 7, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/www.dushanbepolice.tj/posts/pfbid0nFH0LiscCoFpcmTMQGmGpyL5dxsBiXFdSoMMhLz6N3oo58LD4ZCJuc39YX2dJk6l> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹³⁴ Раёсати ВҚД дар вилояти Хатлон, Facebook Post, Translation from the Tajik original by the authors. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=295917066409353&set=pcb.295917743075952> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹³⁵ Interview identifier #213, with a participant of a protest event in Khorugh in May 2022, conducted on 19 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹³⁶ Personal observations by one of the authors in Khorugh in the second half of 2022.

¹³⁷ Interview identifier #210, with a person who observed how a security officer tracked a target person by checking his phone number in summer 2022, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹³⁸ Interview identifier #220, with one Pamiri man who was living in Moscow in early 2022, conducted on 9 February 2024 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

¹³⁹ Asia-Plus, “Обязательная регистрация IMEI телефонов в Таджикистане: зарегистрируй и спи спокойно?”, 27 November 2023: <https://asiaplus.tj/info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20231127/obyazatel'naya-registratsiya-imei-telefonov-v-tadzhikistane-zaregistrirui-i-spi-spokoino> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

Security forces also reportedly searched mobile phones and other electronic devices of detained persons for their address books, personal correspondence and photo galleries to identify their contact persons and find potentially compromising information. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders noted in the report of her country visit to Tajikistan that phones and laptops of human rights defenders had been seized for inspections without court-sanctioned warrants in certain cases.¹⁴⁰ Exiled journalist Anora Sarkorova in February 2024 published a testimony by an anonymous source according to which security officers frequently checked the mobile phones of students of Khorugh State University and fined them in case they followed blacklisted media channels.¹⁴¹ One Pamiri described the situation in Dushanbe:

“When they [security officers] catch somebody on the street, they immediately check the phone. If they find some [suspicious] like, they can open a criminal case. When they interrogated [my relative in 2023], they immediately took [that relative’s phone and returned it only after a few days].”¹⁴²

Arbitrary searches of multiple houses within a certain area by armed security forces were conducted in several villages of Rushan district of GBAO on 18 May 2022 and in several neighbourhoods of Khorugh in June 2022, while search warrants were generally not presented.¹⁴³

After May 2022, the SCNS interrogated residents on a wide scale about their social relations and interactions with each other, in particular prominent community leaders. In combination with the search of mobile phones of detainees, this enabled them to socially map the Pamiri communities. For example, one Pamiri man recalls his interrogation by the SCNS after May 2022 and the questions he was asked:

“They knew everything. Who is your friend... Absolutely everything. They had simply been collecting information since 2012 for everybody. Who has been friends with [one activist]. [...] They know perfectly who is motivated by what.”¹⁴⁴

After May 2022, the security forces put much effort into recruiting secret informants among the Pamiri population and forcing individuals into cooperation, as reported by an anonymous source of Anora Sarkorova in February 2024.¹⁴⁵ One resident of Khorugh who was targeted for recruitment explains that an SCNS officer summoned him for an informal conversation, threatened him with a criminal case and demanded a huge bribe, but then made another proposal:

“The next time [he told me:] ‘We do not need your money. There is another option. If you do not [agree], we will incriminate you with so many crimes that the court will give you at least 10 years. You know it yourself.’ [I asked:] ‘What do you want?’ [He answered:] ‘This is already different words. We will [provide you with a job]. But you will actually work for us. You will report everything to us.’ They wanted to turn me into an agent, they wanted to recruit me. [...] [He said:] ‘You will do your best, you are going to do it. If not – here is the [criminal] case, here is the evidence, we have your [allegedly compromising] message.’”¹⁴⁶

This led to an escalating level of mutual distrust within the communities. For example, one person who visited Khorugh in summer 2022 reported:

“I was hosted in a private place by an acquaintance in Khorugh. We talked about different issues but did not touch politics, even when only close family members were around. After saying farewell to everybody, my acquaintance insisted on accompanying me to the main road. Once we had gained some distance from the private place, this acquaintance suddenly started telling me about the ongoing repression, talking fast and in a whispering tone. Justifying the silence about these issues in the private place, the acquaintance said: ‘To be honest, we do not dare to speak openly, not even at home.’”¹⁴⁷

One Pamiri who lived in GBAO until summer 2022 described the impact on the social fabric similarly:

¹⁴⁰ Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁴¹ Telegram Messenger, Anora Sarkorova, 26 February 2024: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/1596> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). The legal basis for controlling citizens’ online activities and criminalizing “inappropriate comments” had been created in 2017, as reported by Human Rights Watch in: HRW, *Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Tajikistan in 2021*, p. 4: https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021-10/hrw_upr39_tjk_e_main.pdf (last accessed on 22 August 2024), and: Salam Aleik, “Tajik Parliament Plans to Monitor Citizens Who Visit ‘Undesirable’ Websites”, *GlobalVoices*, 31 July 2017: <https://globalvoices.org/2017/07/31/tajik-parliament-plans-to-monitor-citizens-who-visit-undesirable-websites/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). In the case of Abdullohi Shamsiddin, a member of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) who was deported by Germany in January 2023 and detained immediately upon arrival to Dushanbe, the court verdict was made public by Freedom for Eurasia. It shows that the conviction of alleged organization of activities of an extremist organization (Art. 307(3) Criminal Code) was based on pictures of rallies and social media activities found on his mobile phone: Freedom for Eurasia, “Unlawful court verdict against Tajik dissident Abdullohi Shamsiddin was based on evidence handed by German authorities”, 19 March 2024: <https://freedomforeurasia.org/court-verdict-against-tajik-dissident-abdullohi-shamsiddin-based-on-evidence-handed-by-german-authorities/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁴² Interview identifier #231, with a Pamiri person who spent several years living in Dushanbe, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹⁴³ Rushan district: Interview identifier #217, with a resident of Rushan district of GBAO, conducted on 14 June 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. Khorugh: Interview identifier #219, with one Pamiri with work experience in a state institution, conducted on 3 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

¹⁴⁴ Interview identifier #213, with a person interrogated by SCNS in GBAO after May 2022, conducted on 19 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹⁴⁵ Telegram Messenger, Anora Sarkorova, <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/1598> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁴⁶ Interview identifier #208, with a resident of Khorugh whom the SCNS tried to recruit as an agent in 2022, conducted on 3 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

¹⁴⁷ Interview identifier #301, with a person who visited GBAO in summer 2022, conducted on 18 June 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

“One brother did not trust another brother anymore. Everybody was afraid that they would surrender each other [to the security forces]. [...] The people ceased talking to each other, in order to avoid problems. [...] They [the security forces] intimidate the people so that they behave calmly [do not protest].”¹⁴⁸

A “widespread reluctance to speak for fear of reprisals” was also noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief after her visit in GBAO in April 2023.¹⁴⁹

4.3 UNLAWFUL USE OF FORCE AGAINST PROTESTERS

Security forces repeatedly used force unlawfully to quell street protests in GBAO, leading to fatalities and severe injuries, in violation of the rights to life, the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment and the right to security of person. Any use of force by law enforcement officials should be legal, necessary and proportionate.¹⁵⁰ The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials stipulate that “[i]n the dispersal of assemblies that are unlawful but non-violent, law enforcement officials shall avoid the use of force or, where that is not practicable, shall restrict such force to the minimum extent necessary. In the dispersal of violent assemblies, law enforcement officials may use firearms only when less dangerous means are not practicable and only to the minimum extent necessary.” With the exception of very limited and very specific circumstances, “[l]aw enforcement officials shall not use firearms in such cases.”¹⁵¹

On 25 November 2021, several hundreds or thousands of protesters gathered on the square in front of the city administration of Khorugh to protest against the alleged extrajudicial execution of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov (see above in section 4.1) and demand accountability.¹⁵² Eyewitness accounts and a video from the event (see below) indicate that the gathering was peaceful until the moment when security forces fired at the crowd, presumably with live ammunition. Two protesters were killed and 17 were injured, according to media reports.¹⁵³ At least one person likely to have been a law enforcement officer was physically assaulted by the protesters and was likely injured.

One of the protesters who was injured recalls:

“When I approached the square, I saw [a relative]. He was crying. I asked him what was going on. He told me that they had killed him. I asked him whom they had killed. He said that they had killed Gulbiddin. [...] So, we started standing there. They brought Gulbiddin’s body and we took it to the square. We wanted to ask our [officials] why they had killed this man. [...] Gulbiddin’s aunt appeared. She saw his dead body and started crying. She started to curse at the policemen. She wanted to enter the building [of the city administration]. Some women went with her and behind them the crowd was following. [...] They wanted to go in and to call that minister out, or whatever his title is. [...] They [the security forces] started shooting [...] when some men were passing the women and wanted to enter the building before them. Two persons fell down immediately. [...] One person next to me said ‘There are women, we have to protect them. I stood up and went to them [...] we escorted the women away from that place and took them to a safer place. [...] At that time, a bullet hit me [...]. They were shooting from the entrance [of the building of the city administration]. Some of them were standing directly in the entrance, some of them were on the second or third floor. [...] They were wearing uniforms. [...] When I arrived at the hospital, one person had already died, the doctor said that they had already lost one [...] The next day [...] I saw [some of] those guys [who had been injured]. One of them [had been shot] in the leg and the shoulder, one of them only in the shoulder, one of them in the foot [...]”¹⁵⁴

A video geolocated (by Amnesty International as taken at Somoni Square, Khorugh (37.493258, 71.553450) confirms that at least two persons had been shot and at a minimum seriously injured.¹⁵⁵ It offers a limited view but clearly shows a crowd of at least several hundred people standing tightly together in the square around the Somoni monument, and no evidence of any violence nor commotion that would suggest violence in the vicinity. Then a group of some 30-40 people begin marching slowly up a flight of stairs and up a

¹⁴⁸ Interview identifier #210, with a former informal leader of a local community in GBAO, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹⁴⁹ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, para. 76: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). Similarly, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues after his country visit to Tajikistan in October 2023 reported a widespread fear of reprisals and repercussions: Human Rights Council, Visit to Tajikistan: report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, 13 February 2024, paras. 2 and 49: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁵⁰ See for example the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-principles-use-force-and-firearms-law-enforcement> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁵¹ Principles 13, 14 and 9, Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, adopted on 7 September 1990 by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, Cuba, 27 August to 7 September 1990: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-principles-use-force-and-firearms-law-enforcement> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁵² Lorenzo Tondo, “‘We want the truth’: families of ethnic Pamiris killed in Tajikistan call for justice as tensions rise”, The Guardian, 4 February 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/feb/04/we-want-the-truth-families-of-ethnic-pamiris-killed-in-tajikistan-call-for-justice-as-tensions-rise> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁵³ R Mirzonabi Holikzod, Hursand Hurrarov, “Власти запретили выезд за пределы Таджикистана 66 лицам, участвовавшим в протестах в Хоруге”, Radio Ozodi, 23 December 2021: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31622313.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024); Katarzyna Rodacka, “Odcięci od świata”, Nowa Europa Wschodnia, 28 March 2023: https://new.org.pl/2209,rodacka_tadzykistan_gorski_badachszan.html (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁵⁴ Interview identifier #206, with a Pamiri man injured by gunfire on 25 November 2022, conducted on 1 June 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. Amnesty International has been shown a video of the bullet wound.

¹⁵⁵ Gordiy-GBAO, Instagram Post, “И кто же объяснит этим матерям, почему убили их сыновей?”, February 2022: https://www.instagram.com/gordiy_gbao/reel/CZ6PidLFA7M/ (access restricted).

narrowing passage between two hedges towards the entrance to the building of the city administration. One of them is carrying what looks like a white metre-long, thin and apparently lightweight object resembling a rolled-up poster or a long umbrella which is unlikely to be a weapon; none of the others seem to have anything in their hands, neither bags nor backpacks. Then they suddenly stop, and most turn back, in response to something (possibly warning shots fired from the building). Only two men remain at the forefront, and seven men behind them, in the narrow passage. At this point one of those seven suddenly collapses to the ground, having displayed no signs of any aggressive or threatening action. He is picked up by others and carried back towards the crowd; eight men remain in the narrow passage and two more approach from behind; the rest recede into the crowd and remain at some distance once again. One protester is seen making aggressive gestures towards three male figures, likely security personnel, ununiformed, who seem intent on preventing any protesters from entering the building. The protesters grab one of the likely security personnel by his hands and drag him towards the crowd, then start kicking him when he falls on the ground. Then the protester who ends up being the nearest to the building and who is not taking part in the violent incident, then collapses, likely hit by a projectile shot from the right side of the frame, north of the Somoni monument (from inside the city administration building).

UN special rapporteurs in a joint communication to the Government of Tajikistan requested information on the type of orders and guidelines provided to the security forces during the November protests, and measures taken “to carry out an immediate, impartial and transparent investigation”.¹⁵⁶ In a summary response to various communications by UN special rapporteurs, the Tajikistani authorities did not provide any information regarding the death of protesters on 25 November 2021 and only generally outlined the guidelines for the use of firearms by security officers.¹⁵⁷

On 16 May 2022, a group of few hundred protesters peacefully marched from the Bar Khorugh neighbourhood towards downtown Khorugh. The Prosecutor General of GBAO had previously depicted the protesters as “terrorists” and publicly threatened them with harsh punishment beforehand, as reported by the media.¹⁵⁸ Security forces blocked the road in Chinak neighbourhood. After insulting and provoking protesters, they used tear gas and fired rubber bullets, flare guns, and unknown grenades (the use of which causes severe burns). At least one protester was injured during the violent dispersal of the crowd.¹⁵⁹ Many participants of the protest march experienced severe problems with breathing and vision following exposure to tear gas.¹⁶⁰ One participant of the rally reports:

“We wanted to march to the square [in the city center]. In Chinak, the road was blocked with barbed wire. There were Pamiri policemen who had been put in the front. They said that they had order to shoot with live ammunition [...] From behind, Tajik security officers were harshly insulting us. [...] They said they would ... our mothers and sisters. Well, you understand what they actually said. [...] As well, on the hill there were gunmen and security officers who were recording with cameras who was participating in the rally. [...] They started shooting gas grenades at us. [...] In front of us our guys were collapsing. We hauled them back so that they were not detained. Tears started dropping from the eyes. [...] I could not even open my eyes and my nose was completely wet. [...] They also shot with real bullets. There were guys who were injured by bullets. [...] There were also such kind of grenades, when one of them hit a tree, the tree immediately caught fire and burned down. They shot such grenades at the crowd as well.”¹⁶¹

An unpublished video, which has been reviewed by the authors,¹⁶² indicates that there was no violence on the protesters’ side when the security officers opened fire. A crowd of civilians were standing close together. Some of them were wearing face masks, probably to avoid being identified. Some of them were holding placards and one person at the very front was holding the national flag of Tajikistan. Many of them had both their hands raised, probably to show that they were unarmed and had no aggressive intentions. People were shouting and whistling. In front of the protesters, the street was blocked with barbed wire. Several men in camouflage uniform, with helmets and police shields were standing on the other side of the barbed wire. At least some of them had the lower part of their face covered with white masks. A second row of armed personnel was standing a few dozen meters behind them. At some distance, vehicles were visible. One man in civilian clothes was facing the crowd of protesters and shouting at them, apparently trying to deescalate. He turned around and gesticulated towards the security forces, probably trying to prevent them from doing something. A uniformed man without a helmet and shield, apparently a senior security officer, raised his left hand holding an object which has the form of a pistol and directed it into the air. He then took down the hand again. A few seconds later, he raised both hands and took them down again. The uniformed men close to the barbed wire directed objects resembling guns into the air above the protesters. One man in civilian clothes ran away from the barbed wire towards the security forces. He was holding an object in his right hand which looked like a police baton, which could indicate that he was a security officer evacuating. At the same time, a flash was visible close to the barbed wire, and the air was suddenly full of smoke. More flashes could be seen and sounds of shots could be heard. Chaos broke out among the protesters who rushed away from the barbed wire.

¹⁵⁶ the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 11 March 2022, p. 5:

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27142> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁵⁷ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Tajikistan To The UN Office And Other International Organizations In Geneva, Information regarding the events in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR), 15 May 2023, pp. 3-4 and p. 7: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=37600> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁵⁸ Radio Ozodi, “Митинг в Хорого. Власти отказались выполнить требования участников акции протеста”, 16 May 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31853011.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024); Mediazona, “Прокуратура ГБАО обвинила лидера местной общины в сговоре с оппозицией и пригрозила ему делом о терроризме”, 16 May 2022: <https://mediazona.ca/news/2022/05/16/gbao> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁵⁹ Amnesty International has been shown photos of a severe burn of one participant of the protest march.

¹⁶⁰ Interview identifier #213, with a participant of the protest march, conducted on 19 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹⁶¹ Interview identifier #211, with a participant of the rally on 16 May 2022, conducted on 15 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

¹⁶² The person who recorded the video is known to the authors. The video has not been published because the faces of several protesters are recognizable, and they would have to fear reprisals if evidence of their participation in the protest march got public.

On 16 or 17 May, news spread that a military convoy had left Dushanbe and was on its way to Khorugh. In Vamar, the district centre of Rushan district of GBAO around 60 km north of Khorugh, hundreds of residents gathered to block the road in order to prevent the military convoy from passing through. Very little visual material of the protest is publicly available¹⁶³ as the mobile connection was disabled in the area at the time and, as reported by eyewitnesses interviewed by Anora Sarkorova,¹⁶⁴ security forces searched houses and seized mobile phones from local residents afterwards apparently to prevent them from publishing any visual evidence of the event. In contradictory and vague accounts, the authorities depicted protesters as members of “criminal groups” and “terrorists”. On 18 May 2022, the MIA alleged that criminal groups had used weapons, ammunition and “Molotov cocktails” to attack a convoy of vehicles of the anti-terror unit of the SCNS.¹⁶⁵ The following day, the state news agency “Khovar”, referring to the MIA, claimed that “members of organized criminal groups” had shelled administrative buildings in Vamar from strategic positions in the mountains, but provided no visual evidence of the alleged shelling or its aftermath.¹⁶⁶ For such strong allegations from official sources, it is unusual that the claim about the shelling has not been repeated since. President Emomali Rahmon, when justifying the security operation on 16 June 2022, did not mention such shelling of buildings but only claimed vaguely that a convoy had been attacked, the road had been blocked and the mayor of Rushan district as well as the deputy mayor had been beaten.¹⁶⁷ In a statement published on 7 October 2022, the Office of the Prosecutor General mentioned neither the shelling of buildings nor the attack on a convoy, only a road blockade, an attack with firearms on security officers, the beating of police officers and the drowning of two unspecified individuals in the river.¹⁶⁸

In two lists published by the MIA on 23 May 2023, 46 detainees were described as “members of organized criminal-extremist-terrorist groups who had participated in the rallies on 15-18 May 2022 in Rushan district”.¹⁶⁹ The MIA wrote about one of the detainees: “He has been an active participant of illegal protest events in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region since 2012.”¹⁷⁰ It stated about another participant: “Upon invitation by [...] he actively took part in the rally in Rushan district on 17 May 2022.”¹⁷¹ The only specific accusations related to recent events against some of the individuals was the alleged participation of three detainees in the beating of state officials.¹⁷² This strongly indicates that the authorities were not able to substantiate their general allegations of the use of armed force. Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, talking to eyewitnesses in Vamar, did not find any evidence of weapons on the protesters’ side apart from sticks and a hunting rifle.¹⁷³ The testimony of an eyewitness obtained by the research team (see below) suggests that the gathering was peaceful until the security forces used force.

¹⁶³ An exception are two photos allegedly showing the protesting crowd in Vamar which were published by Russian political analyst Andrey Serenko on his Telegram channel on 17 May 2022: <https://t.me/anserenko/4281> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁶⁴ Telegram Messenger, Anora Sarkorova, “РАССКАЗЫ СВИДЕТЕЛЕЙ”, 7 June 2022, <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/102> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁶⁵ Khovar published the official report by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, 18 May 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/05/v-nastoyashhee-vremya-obstanovka-v-rushane-stabilnaya-press-tsentr-mvd-rt-soobshhaet/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁶⁶ Khovar, “Пресс-центр Министерства внутренних дел Республики Таджикистан сообщает”, 19 May 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/05/press-tsentr-ministerstva-vnutrennih-del-respubliki-tadzhikistan-soobshhaet-2/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁶⁷ Khovar, “ПРЕЗИДЕНТ ПОРУЧИЛ ОБЕСПЕЧИТЬ РЕАЛИЗАЦИЮ ПРОЕКТОВ ПО РАЗВИТИЮ ГБАО”, 28 June 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/06/prezident-poruchil-obespechit-realizatsiyu-proektov-po-razvitiyu-gbao-samoj-krupnoj-po-territorii-oblasti-tadzhikistana-predrekayut-burnoe-razvitie/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁶⁸ Prosecutor General’s Office, “Маълумотҳои бардурӯи ивғангезон дар САҲА 2022”, 8 October 2022: the original link (<https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1639-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-485.html>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20240302194719/https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1639-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-485.html> (as of 22 August 2022).

¹⁶⁹ Official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, добровольно явившихся к властям”, 29 June 2022: the original link

(<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20220629151437/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022); and “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, которые были установлены и задержаны”, 7 July 2022: the original link

(<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34125-r-jkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-soli-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-ki-muajyan-va-dastgir-karda-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20220707170854/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34125-r-jkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-soli-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-ki-muajyan-va-dastgir-karda-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022).

¹⁷⁰ Official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, добровольно явившихся к властям”, 29 June 2022, No. 4: the original link

(<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20220629151437/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022).

¹⁷¹ Official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, добровольно явившихся к властям”, 29 June 2022, No. 11: the original link

(<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20220629151437/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022).

¹⁷² Official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, добровольно явившихся к властям”, 29 June 2022, Nos. 5, 6, 7: the original link

(<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20220629151437/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022).

¹⁷³ RFE/RL’s Tajik Service, “Heartbreak And Sorrow: Remote Tajik Region In Mourning After Bloody State Crackdown”, 24 June 2022: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-gorno-badakhshan-bloody-crackdown/31914045.html> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

On the morning of 18 May 2022, hundreds of officers of different law enforcement agencies, most of whom had arrived in Vamar only hours before the crackdown, dispersed the protest by using excessive force and shot several protesters.¹⁷⁴ Photos published on 28 May 2022 show two buildings at the market of Vamar with at least two dozen apparent bullet holes in their facades which were probably inflicted by security forces.¹⁷⁵ At least two persons were shot from a helicopter in the mountains above Vamar, according to an exiled journalist.¹⁷⁶

One participant of the protest event who spoke to Amnesty International's researchers said:

“We were demanding the release of prisoners¹⁷⁷ and the [rule of] law with regard to those who killed Gulbiddin [Ziyobekov]. [...] We were blocking the road for the Alpha troops [coming from Dushanbe] on 16 May. [...] We even provided them with food and opened the road to the base [of the border guards] for them, we said “Have a rest, let’s negotiate tomorrow”. But they did not want to negotiate anymore. [...] On 17 May, they sent the OMON and Alpha forces from Khorugh. [...] On 18 May in the early morning, the OMON forces from Khatlon region and Dushanbe [arrived]. [...] The people [around 30-40 persons] were standing near the small bridge [in the centre of Vamar] [...] Three squads of OMON forces came out of the police building [at around 6 am]. [...] They waited for the helicopter to arrive. Once the helicopter had arrived, they started shooting. They shot directly [at the people]. [...] The troops which had arrived from Khorugh were shooting from the other side as well. [...] We ran away [...] and hid in a house [in Vamar]. [...] We stayed there for one or two hours. [...] We thought they only wanted to clear the road and head on to Khorugh. But they continued. [...] We were told that they were entering the houses and searching them, so we [split into] small groups and fled uphill to the gorge.”¹⁷⁸

A relative of one of those shot by security forces in the morning of 18 May 2022, who was not in Tajikistan at that time, recalls:

“The last time that I talked to my relative was on 17 May 2022. He said that he was in the centre of Vamar and that the people had gathered there to prevent that military convoy from passing. [...] The next day, they [the authorities] gave orders to shoot at the civilians. [...] Throughout the day, I learnt about the tragic events in Vamar and about some neighbours who had been killed. But only when I came home from work in the evening, I got to know that our family had also been hit by such a calamity, that my [relative] had died. [...] None of my relatives in Vamar talks about the events openly by phone, they just say general things like ‘We are doing well’. [...] Only after many months, one [...] from Vamar was staying abroad and told me details about what had happened to my [relative]. Apparently, he was on the way from one neighbourhood to another neighbourhood in the morning [of 18 May 2022]. Military people were hidden behind a barrier and shot at him. [...] They searched him to see whether he had weapons, did not find anything and then hid again behind their barrier. They did not help him. [...] My [relative] was only injured and managed to make it to a nearby home. The person there delivered first aid and called an ambulance but they [the security forces] did not let any ambulance pass. My [relative] died from the bleeding. [...] He died at around lunchtime. [...] I have suffered a lot. [...] I have often dreamed of visiting his grave, at least, once I even wanted to buy an air ticket to Tajikistan. But my relatives did not let me go, they feared for my safety. [...] The only thing I can do is pray for him.”¹⁷⁹

According to the authorities, one security officer and eight so-called “fighters” were killed during the events, but they did not provide any details.¹⁸⁰ According to independently collated lists of fatalities, however, 24 civilians died on 18-19 May 2022, some during the violent crackdown on protesters, and some as a result of subsequent unlawful killings (see below).¹⁸¹ The security officer who was allegedly killed according to the authorities, has never been named, raising doubt as to whether this death actually occurred.

¹⁷⁴ Catherine Putz, “The Pamir Powderkeg”, *The Diplomat*, 1 June 2022: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/the-pamir-powderkeg/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024); RFE/RL’s Tajik Service, “Heartbreak And Sorrow, Remote Tajik Region In Mourning After Bloody State Crackdown”, 24 June 2022: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-gorno-badakhshan-bloody-crackdown/31914045.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁷⁵ One photo shows a one-storey building with a flat roof and at least 10 apparent bullet holes in the façade; another photo shows a two-storey building with at least 18 apparent bullet holes on the right side: Pamirinside, Telegram channel: <https://t.me/pamirinside/862?single> and <https://t.me/pamirinside/863?single> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). The buildings are located at the eastern side of the market of Vamar, approximately 80-90 meters north of the road crossing and the police station in the center of Vamar where part of the security forces had been deployed. The fact that the northern part of the western façade of the two-storey building is undamaged indicates that the bullet holes on the southern part were caused by shots fired from a southwestern direction where security forces were deployed in and outside the police station, not from a northwestern direction where, according to the MIA, armed residents had occupied positions in the mountains.

¹⁷⁶ Catherine Putz, “The Pamir Powderkeg”, *The Diplomat*, 1 June 2022: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/the-pamir-powderkeg/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024); Anora Sarkorova’s Telegram channel: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/353>; the journalist also published a video of the examination of the bodies by security forces: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/354> (both posts last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁷⁷ Prisoners detained between November 2021 and May 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Interview identifier #217, with a participant of the protest event, conducted on 14 June 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. The prisoners mentioned by the interlocutor were Pamiris who had been detained after previous protests in Khorugh.

¹⁷⁹ Interview identifier #216, with a relative of the fatality, conducted on 22 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. The exact relationship between the interviewee and the relative is concealed to protect him and his family from further reprisals.

¹⁸⁰ Khovar, “Пресс-центр Министерства внутренних дел Республики Таджикистан сообщает”, 19 May 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/05/press-tsentr-ministerstva-vnutrennih-del-respubliki-tadzhikistan-soobshhaet-2> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁸¹ The initiative Roof-top Info and Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, list 24 fatalities in Rushan district on or shortly after 18 May 2022: <https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/file/background-information-on-the-situation-in-kh/download/Background-information-on-the-situation-in-Khorugh.pdf> and [https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32087992.html#/#/](https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32087992.html#/) (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024). This does not include two individuals who committed suicide after detention and five individuals killed in Rushan district on 31 May 2022. Both sources include detailed information about the circumstances of several of the fatalities and build upon the work of journalist Anora Sarkorova, who did extensive research on the events in Rushan. In an early list of 26 fatalities, Sarkorova counted two individuals twice (under different family names): <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/176> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues criticized the “heavy-handed response to end protests by the Pamiri minority through arrests, the excessive and unlawful use of force, and the involvement of the military” as “disproportionate and deeply disturbing”.¹⁸²

Calls from international stakeholders for independent investigations into the unlawful use of force remained without any tangible effect.¹⁸³ The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues after his country visit to Tajikistan in October 2023 reported about the attitude of state officials that:

“there was outright hostility and denial regarding any need for an independent inquiry concerning allegations of violations of the rights of members of the Pamiri minority during the violent events in the region in 2021 and 2022. Any individuals arrested or detained were simply described as terrorists, criminals or extremists by officials and no further examination of the alleged atrocities committed against civilians was required, since the matter had already been dealt with under the laws of Tajikistan.”¹⁸⁴

4.4 ORDINARY PAMIRIS TARGETED FOR PROSECUTION

Apart from arbitrarily detaining informal community leaders and other influential community members (see section 4.2 above), the security forces also targeted ordinary Pamiris. As a result, Pamiris in GBAO, mostly young men, were often arbitrarily arrested, detained, interrogated, tortured or otherwise ill-treated and prosecuted by the security forces for vague “terrorism” or “extremism” related offences or under other spurious charges. Eurasianet, an independent media project, reported in August 2022 that hundreds of Pamiris had been arbitrarily arrested as part of the crackdown on their communities in the preceding months, and dozens were already standing trial in unfair proceedings.¹⁸⁵

4.4.1 PARTICIPANTS AND SUPPORTERS OF PEACEFUL PROTEST EVENTS

The security forces had been keeping track of who had participated in protest events and night vigils. In some cases, such persons were summoned for interrogation and prosecuted soon after the respective event. Dozens of participants of the rally in November 2021 were banned from leaving the country.¹⁸⁶ According to information received by UN special rapporteurs, dozens of protest participants were convicted and sentenced to prison terms for allegedly cutting down trees and assaulting officials.¹⁸⁷ In the case of the protests in Rushan district, on 23 May 2022, the MIA published two lists of 46 detained “members of organized criminal-extremist-terrorist groups who had participated in the rallies on 15-18 May 2022 in Rushan district”.¹⁸⁸ They, as well as other participants of the protests, were later convicted, mostly of participating in an organized criminal group (Art. 187 Criminal Code) in a closed and unfair trial (see below). The Office of the Prosecutor General stated in October 2022 that as a result of the events on 18 May 2022 in Rushan district, 77 residents of the district had been sentenced for criminal offences, investigations were ongoing in 32 cases, and 89 individuals had been fined for administrative offences.¹⁸⁹ Apart from the participation in protest events, the authorities also targeted those who had supported

¹⁸² OHCHR, “Tajikistan: UN expert fears crackdown against Pamiri minority could spiral out of control”, 20 May 2022: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/tajikistan-un-expert-fears-crackdown-against-pamiri-minority-could-spiral> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁸³ Delegation of the European Union to the International Organisations in Vienna, “EU Statement on the latest developments in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in Tajikistan”, 26 May 2022: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna-international-organisations/osce-permanent-council-no-1375-vienna-26-may-2022-1_en?s=66; European Parliament resolution of 7 July 2022 on the situation in Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (2022/2753(RSP), 7 July 2022: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0293_EN.html; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, “Latest developments in Tajikistan: UK statement to the OSCE”, 27 May 2022: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/latest-developments-in-tajikistan-uk-statement-to-the-osce> (all sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁸⁴ Specifically, the Governor of GBAO “simply refused to acknowledge any need to comply, since the Government had already concluded that all those involved were terrorists or criminals.” Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Fernand de Varennes, Visit to Tajikistan, par. 34: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁸⁵ Eurasianet, “Tajikistan: Pamiri activists imprisoned en masse”, 11 August 2022: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-pamiri-activists-imprisoned-en-masse> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁸⁶ Mirzonabii Holikzod, Hursand Hurrarov, “Мақомот сафари 66 нафар эътирозгари Хоруфро ба хорич манъ кардааст”, Radio Ozodi, 22 December 2021: <https://www.ozodi.org/a/31621624.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁸⁷ Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 11 March 2022, p. 3: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMRResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27142> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁸⁸ Official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, добровольно явившихся к властям”, 29 June 2022: the original link (<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on: <http://web.archive.org/web/20220629151437/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022); and “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, которые были установлены и задержаны”, 7 July 2022: the original link (<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34125-r-jkhati-a-zojoni-gur-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terroristii-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-soli-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirokdoshta-ki-muajyan-va-dastgir-karda-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on: <http://web.archive.org/web/20220707170854/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34125-r-jkhati-a-zojoni-gur-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terroristii-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-soli-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirokdoshta-ki-muajyan-va-dastgir-karda-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022).

¹⁸⁹ Prosecutor General’s Office, “Маълумотҳои бардурӯғи иғвоангезон дар САҲА 2022”, 8 October 2022: the original link (<https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1639-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-485.html>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on: <http://web.archive.org/web/20240302194719/https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1639-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-485.html> (as of 22 August 2022). This is around 1.5 percent of the population registered in the two municipalities most affected by the crackdown. According to UN data, Rushan municipality was reported to have had around 6,600 inhabitants in 2015, and Dodikhudoev a population of 6,100: UNDP in Tajikistan, “Jamoat-Level Basic Indicators, 2024”: <https://untj.org/jambi-project/index.php/maps-statistics/demography> (accessed in February 2024).

protests financially or in kind. One interlocutor reported that a neighbour had been detained and convicted of supporting protesters financially.¹⁹⁰

In other cases, information about the participation in protest events and night vigils was recorded by the security forces but prosecution was initiated notably later. For example, three interlocutors who were interrogated after the May 2022 crackdown, reported that during interrogation they had been confronted with information about their role in previous protest events which had apparently been collected by the respective security agency.¹⁹¹

4.4.2 PEOPLE CLOSE TO INFORMAL COMMUNITY LEADERS

In the aftermath of the May 2022 crackdown, the security forces summoned relatives, neighbours, friends and even acquaintances of informal community leaders for interrogation and often detained them. In many cases, such a summons was triggered only by social relations or social interaction with a person targeted by the security forces, not on the basis of evidence of any offence by the respective individual or even their individual involvement in any political activity. Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, listed seven community leaders who were killed or detained in May or June 2022 and whose male relatives were subsequently detained as well.¹⁹² The Tajikistani authorities in their summary reply to various communications by UN experts alleged that “the members of [...] criminal groups are virtually all either close relatives of the leaders or residents of the same areas as them.”¹⁹³

4.4.3 PROVOKING VIOLENT REACTION BY VERBAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT

Even before 2022, there had been a long history of detention and prosecution of Pamiris who had reacted to provocations by ethnic Tajik members of security forces who, relying on impunity for themselves, verbally abused, discriminated against and sexually harassed Pamiris. In December 2021, one anonymous author from GBAO wrote:

“Many of them [ethnic Tajik security officers] behave in a very rude, aggressive and arrogant way towards the local population. In the centre of the town, where the building of the SCNS is located, its employees were standing there with guns. They stood there with weapons even before the November [2021] events in GBAO. While the rally was going on, they, armed with guns, walked along the road in the centre of Khorugh and loudly insulted local youth with offensive words and curses, in spite of women and children being in the streets. This way, the SCNS officers wanted to provoke the local youth to a conflict. The security officers from outside are deeply alien to Pamiri customs and traditions, and they do not know the local languages at all. They often call the Pamiris disrespectfully “gans” because the residents speak their mother tongues.”¹⁹⁴

This had not changed substantially by summer 2023. One Pamiri living in Khorugh at that time reported:

“The security forces in Khorugh behave like wolves looking after sheep. ‘You should not walk like this, you should not laugh!’”¹⁹⁵

In some cases, such provocations by security officers leading to conflicts happened at the intra-urban checkpoints set up in Khorugh in 2018 or the checkpoints at the administrative boundaries between districts, as the Anti-Discrimination Center (ADC) Memorial wrote in March 2023 in its Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD): “Our sources reported that during inspections [of cars at checkpoints], law enforcement officers insulted and humiliated residents, including women, and extorted money from them, which provoked Pamiri[s] to respond.”¹⁹⁶ According to a human rights defender in exile, who has heard of three such incidents directly from GBAO residents who were prosecuted, security officers frequently provoked residents with insults and threats, often during traffic controls, and turned on their bodycams in the moment when the resident started reacting in order to create evidence of insults or violence.¹⁹⁷

One young Pamiri man, who was provoked into a brawl and subsequently imprisoned around 2020, recalls:

¹⁹⁰ Interview identifier #228, with a Pamiri Ismaili person who had fled from Tajikistan in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹⁹¹ Interview identifier #208, with a resident of Khorugh whom the SCNS tried to recruit as an agent in 2022, conducted on 3 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity. Interview identifier #210, with a Pamiri Ismaili man summoned for interrogation in GBAO after May 2022, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. Interview identifier #213, with a Pamiri Ismaili man summoned for interrogation in GBAO after May 2022, conducted on 19 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

¹⁹² Radio Ozodi, “«Семейные» приговоры? Почему уроженцы ГБАО целыми семьями оказались за решеткой”, 3 July 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32486926.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁹³ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Tajikistan To The UN Office And Other International Organizations In Geneva, Information regarding the events in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR), 15 May 2023, p. 6: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=37600> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

¹⁹⁴ Pamir Inside, “О ситуации в ГБАО. Какое морально-психологическое давление испытывает население региона”, 29 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/o-ситуации-в-гбао-какое-морально-психо/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). Translation from the Russian original by the authors. “Gans” derives from the German first name “Hans”, used as derogatory during the Second World War.

¹⁹⁵ Interview identifier #218, with a Pamiri living in Khorugh, conducted on 27 August 2023 by a video call on condition of anonymity.

¹⁹⁶ ADC Memorial, Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020, 20 March 2023, p. 7: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/adcmemorial-cerd-109-session-tajikistan-april-2023-eng-final.pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

¹⁹⁷ Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

“I accidentally saw how traffic policemen stopped a young Pamiri guy driving a car [...]. The guy called me for help. I approached the traffic police officers. Both of them were [ethnic] Tajiks. They asked me who I was. I said that I was just another Pamiri. They started insulting me and the other guy. They said all of us were monkeys. Then they already cursed my mother. [...] A few hours after this incident, I went to [another place in Khorugh]. The car of the two traffic police officers was parked next to [a specific building]. The two traffic police officers were approaching their car, saw me and addressed me: ‘It’s again you here, or what?’ It started again. They again used swearwords, again insulted my mum. One of the traffic police officers was cursing at me while he opened the door of the car and took a seat inside. I could not control myself anymore and struck him in the face. He was not injured, there was no blood and no bruise. I left the scene. [...] They got the video from the surveillance camera [at a specific building], identified me and searched for me. [...] I paid a bribe at the police station, and they released me and promised that I would not be convicted. [...] But the court sentenced me to [...] months in prison. [...] Such brawls [with security officers] happen frequently. They [the security officers] provoke such conflicts on purpose, so that they have evidence, so that they can imprison people, so that the [Pamiri] young men get criminal records. [...] They are used to cursing [other people’s] mothers and sisters. But for us, when the mum or the sister gets insulted, that’s it.”¹⁹⁸

Security forces sexually harassed Pamiri girls and women, which triggered a reaction by young Pamiri men who, in turn, risked prosecution for insulting or using violence against representatives of the state, or on fabricated charges. For example, journalist Anora Sarkorova in June 2022 reported about two men who had intervened to end sexual harassment of two women by security forces in Ishkashim district of GBAO, and who had then been taken into custody and prosecuted for an alleged attempt to illegally cross the state border.¹⁹⁹ One young Pamiri man living in another region of Tajikistan outside of GBAO recalls an incident which led to his arrest:

“[At my workplace] there was a Pamiri girl. She did not speak Tajik well. Everybody was aware that we have many languages in the Pamirs and mainly speak Shughni. [...] [But] the guys [ethnic Tajik co-workers] started to make fun of her, they found it ridiculous and talked to her in a way which was not nice and appropriate. I told them that they should not do this, the girl had grown up in the Pamirs, and we in the Pamirs did not speak Tajik so often. They said that she was also their employee and they could behave as they liked.”²⁰⁰

4.5 TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment are prohibited under international law. The UN Convention Against Torture (CAT) defines torture as any “act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.” (Art. 1 Par. 1). Torture is also prohibited under Article 18 of the Constitution of Tajikistan.²⁰¹

Judging from credible accounts of interlocutors who had been in custody, torture and other ill-treatment by security officers were common practices in GBAO before, during and after the May 2022 crackdown. They were used to extract information, to coerce individuals to sign “confessions” or to make incriminating statements in public, and to intimidate or psychologically break individuals held or summoned for questioning by security forces. This confirms reports²⁰² which consistently indicate that torture and other inhuman and degrading treatment of people from GBAO in custody has been widespread, particularly in the context of interrogation. Pamiris were also often subject to racial abuse while in custody. There was no known case of a formal complaint of torture by any Pamiri detained in the context of the May 2022 crackdown, and there is little if any doubt that this was due to the fear of further reprisals. No security officer was held accountable for human rights violations committed during the crackdown. This reflects the widespread belief that security forces were acting within a culture of impunity, and a fear of reprisals if a complaint were to be made.

Amnesty International has received first-hand accounts of torture and other ill-treatment faced by six people in GBAO while in custody, mostly before 2022. In view of the pervasive impunity in which security forces perpetrated torture and other ill-treatment before 2022 (see below), the same patterns likely continued also in and after 2022.

¹⁹⁸ Interview identifier #201, with a Pamiri Ismaili man, conducted on 22 January 2024 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

¹⁹⁹ Anora Sarkorova’s Telegram channel, 12 June 2022: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/152> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁰⁰ Interview identifier #224, with a Pamiri Ismaili living in a region of Tajikistan outside of GBAO, conducted on 20 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

²⁰¹ Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan, <https://mfa.tj/en/main/tajikistan/constitution> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁰² HRW, “Tajikistan: Events of 2021”, 2022, Section 1c: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/tajikistan>, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/tajikistan/>; Specifically for GBAO: U.S. Department of State, 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tajikistan: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/tajikistan/>; IPHR, Tajikistan: Escalating tensions & crackdown on human rights defenders & journalists, 15 September 2022: <https://www.iphronline.org/tajikistan-civics-2021-2022.html>; HRW, “Tajikistan: Autonomous Region Protesters Denied Fair Trials”, 23 August 2022: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/23/tajikistan-autonomous-region-protesters-denied-fair-trials>; HRW, “Tajikistan: Long Sentences for Autonomous Region Activists”, 12 December 2022: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/12/tajikistan-long-sentences-autonomous-region-activists> (all sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

4.5.1 SEXUALISED, RACIAL AND OTHER VERBAL ABUSE IN CUSTODY

Whichever security agency was summoning them for interrogation, or apprehending or holding them in custody, interlocutors consistently reported that interrogating officers were ethnic Tajiks from other regions of the country. Even in cases in which no physical violence happened, interlocutors reported that they had been verbally assaulted, specifically that officers of security agencies used insults and verbal denigrations. This did not only inflict humiliation and intimidation, but also served as a strategy to provoke verbal or physical reactions which could be used as a pretext for prosecution and imprisonment. Such insults typically had sexual, ethnic and religious layers.

Officers of security agencies offended female relatives of the person who was interrogated. They used collective swearwords about Pamiris, typically “gans”. They also threatened Pamiri women with sexual abuse. One Pamiri man from Khorugh was interrogated by SCNS officers several years before 2022.

“One of them said: ‘We will completely destroy you. We will destroy every single one. I will tell you that we will destroy the men of the Pamiris, and we will rape your wives, mothers and sisters. We will rape every single one.’”²⁰³

They swore at the Aga Khan or ridiculed him as a mundane businessperson.

“They consider him [our Imam, the Aga Khan] as a businessman, for them he is nobody. But for us, he is our Imam. They know that we appreciate him, therefore they curse him on purpose. If you cry, if you open your mouth, they beat [you]. But he is our Imam, our leader, this concerns all Ismailis. It is so embarrassing, tears come like this. You cannot say nothing. But if you open your mouth, they immediately beat [you].”²⁰⁴

They defamed Ismailis as “infidels”. One Pamiri Ismaili man from Khorugh who was interrogated by SCNS officers after May 2022 recalls:

“They insulted [our] religion. They had called us infidels [kafir] already for a long time. [...] They always call us [Pamiris] ‘gans’. They said ‘Your Aga Khan is guilty of everything. [...] They believe that we are all infidels [kafir]. [...] They believe that yes, we are different. [...] They show to the world that we are all Tajiks, but internally they make divisions. [...] [They think:] ‘You are not a real Muslim.’ [...] They do not show it openly. During interrogation they say openly what they usually hide. [...] When a person from the law enforcement agencies calls you like this, he singles you out from the mass of people. ‘Pamiri.’ And he also calls you infidel [kafir], insults you in an ethnic and religious sense.”²⁰⁵

One Pamiri Ismaili who was interrogated by SCNS officers after May 2022 alleged that the officer also made threats with ethnocide and genocide:

“They call [us] names, curse our Imam. ‘You are infidels’. ‘Soon your day will come and there will be an end to your Pamiri-ness’. ‘Soon you will sing songs in Tajik for us’. ‘You are all bad people, it would be better to get rid of you as soon as possible’. ‘We will kill or detain you all’. ‘We will get hold of all your leaders’. [...] In those years they were not so free as to speak like this publicly. But when they talked to us youth, then they spoke out openly. [...] It was the investigator who said this, the people in masks only used swearwords and beat. ‘We will get hold of everybody’. ‘The time will come when you will dance and sing in Tajik and we will watch’. ‘All Pamiris are worms for me. You are all infidels. We will take away ... all your land. We will kill you all. We will transfer those of male sex elsewhere and rape all your girls.’”²⁰⁶

4.5.2 PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

In six documented cases of interrogation, torture and other ill-treatment was used or threatened. One man who was interrogated by the SCNS after May 2022 recalls:

“[The officer said:] ‘We have two methods. One of them – we will beat you in the basement like a donkey, and the other method – in a human way, amicably. Choose yourself.’ [In reality,] they never talked to anybody in a human way. They have just one method – to torture and humiliate your human dignity. They only said this....”²⁰⁷

Another man was interrogated by SCNS officers several years before 2022:

²⁰³ Interview identifier #101, with a Pamiri man summoned for interrogation in GBAO several years before 2022, conducted on 5 March 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁰⁴ Interview identifier #209, with a Pamiri Ismaili man held in custody several years before 2022, conducted on 23 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁰⁵ Interview identifier #213, with a Pamiri Ismaili man summoned for interrogation in GBAO after May 2022, conducted on 19 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁰⁶ Interview identifier #204, with a person who had been kept in SCNS custody before 2022, conducted on 30 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁰⁷ Interview identifier #210, with a Pamiri Ismaili man summoned for interrogation in GBAO after May 2022, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

“Seeing my stubbornness and reluctance to sign papers with perjury, the investigators pulled a hammer out of the closet. They took [my] hand, put it on the table and hit the middle finger with all their strength. I was in terrible pain, screamed and fell to the floor. I couldn’t think clearly and I was no longer aware of reality. I couldn’t bring myself to believe what was happening.”²⁰⁸

In addition, sticking needles under the nails, electric shocks, death threats and sleep deprivation were reported by survivors interviewed by Amnesty International. For example, one man was kept in custody by the MIA in Khorugh for several days before 2022 and pressured to smear informal community leaders before he was released after pressure from civil society and payment of a bribe:

“They wanted me to testify against [one informal community leader]. [...] The document was completely prepared, they just wanted me to sign it. [...] I did not agree and they took me to a black room, you could not see anything there. [...] They said they will act in such a way, that I confess having killed Lenin. [...] They beat me so [badly], I was in such a condition, that there was a flash from my eye, as if the eye was taking a photo of something. [...] I was lying on the floor, and they kicked me for several minutes. [...] They took me there [to the dark room] twice, then they already started a different approach, torturing me with needles. [...] They put a needle between the nail and the skin, on all fingers of the [...] hand. [...] [When they do this] the nerves are activated everywhere, you feel the pain in your whole body. [...] One of the fingertips later was inflamed and the doctor had to remove the fingernail.”²⁰⁹

Another man was kept in custody by the SCNS in Khorugh for several days before 2022. He showed scars on various fingers of one of his hands to a member of the research team and explained:

“They did not let me sleep for two days, the guard on duty just came and said ‘Stand’. [...] They beat me. Every day they called me for interrogation two or three times and beat me. One asked the questions, two or three persons were standing and beating. [...] My hands were in handcuffs. [...] They beat me with fists and batons. They also hit me on the head with a book, this hurt the most, it was a very thick book. [...] When they asked and I did not answer, they wrapped wet tissues around my fingers, then [fixed it with] tape. They put clips and switched something on. The [electric] current was strong. [...] They did it with different fingers. [...] They did it twice every day, four times all in all. [...] The third day, they did not touch me anymore and already gave me food. The first two days they had not given me anything to eat and to drink.”²¹⁰

In the case of another Pamiri man detained in summer 2022, the account of a relative indicates that he was tortured and otherwise ill-treated. When the relative visited the detainee in the detention centre a few days after his arrest and wanted to hug him, the detainee reportedly screamed out of pain and asked the relative to bring him a certain medicine which was a pain killer.²¹¹ Like in many other cases of arbitrary detention during 2022, the detainee is serving a long prison term and no first-hand information can be collected.

In high-profile cases, the head of the office of the respective security agency sometimes personally conducted the interrogation and attended it.²¹² Physical violence was often delegated to subordinates acting on behalf or with the acquiescence of the leadership between interrogation sessions. For example, one man was held in SCNS custody before 2022:

“The investigator was doing the interrogation, and the patrol officers were beating [...]. Those without any rank [...] who have just started their job [...] they do all the dirty work. [...] They were all in masks, I could only see the investigator. [...] In such cases [when I did not answer as wished] the investigator said: ‘Ah, you do not know – guys, help him to remember.’”²¹³

One interlocutor had gained work experience in the MIA in the late 2010s in western Tajikistan. He reported a culture of violence and impunity within the MIA structures, confirming many of the torture and other ill-treatment methods mentioned in the victims’ testimonies:

“In [staff] meetings they told us that we had to deal with the people in harsh way so that they were scared of us and of the authorities. [...] When somebody was brought [to the police station], they [other police officers] did not ask any questions, they immediately gave electric shocks, took their trousers down [...] When I said that this was not right, they [other police officers] said that I was a rebel. [...] If somebody died [from the electric shock], they would call the prosecutor, and they would write down something [as a fake cause of death] – heart attack [or whatever]. When they once detained a Pamiri in [a district outside of GBAO], they maltreated him so much. They put him on a chair, tape over his mouth and his eyes, they inserted needles [under his fingernails], they ripped off two fingernails. He said that he had not done anything. Then [...] they inserted needles [under his toenails], ripped off toenails. [...] Then they said ‘Let’s rape him.’ I said ‘It is enough, the prosecutor is coming.’ They said ‘The prosecutor is ours [on our side].’ They took a baton and [...] raped him with it.] I was nearby but could not do anything. [...] I was just observing. [...] He was screaming. They put a piece of cloth into his mouth and then tape [over it]. [...] There

²⁰⁸ Interview identifier #101, with a Pamiri man held in custody for several years before 2022, conducted on 5 March 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁰⁹ Interview identifier #207, with a person who was kept in MIA custody before 2022, conducted on 30 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²¹⁰ Interview identifier #204, with a person who was kept in SCNS custody before 2022, conducted on 30 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. An Amnesty International researcher has been shown scars on the fingers of the victim.

²¹¹ This was reported by an interlocutor who had been informed directly by the relative of the detainee: Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

²¹² Interview identifier #210, with a person summoned for interrogation by a SNCS branch and a MIA branch, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²¹³ Interview identifier #204, with a person who was kept in SCNS custody before 2022, conducted on 30 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

was a bag with instruments. Batons, pliers for ripping the nails off, needles, electric shocker, stapler for the ear. [...] There is a set of instruments in each police station, in some stations they [the instruments] are in the safe. [...] torture can be done by anybody, even by the neighbourhood police officers, with batons and fists. [...] The superior says: 'Do your job. Close the doors and windows so that there is not much noise.' In the [staff] meeting he [the superior] asks about the results: 'He [the detainee] is still alive? Send him to the water.' [...] They [the MIA leadership] gives certificates and medals to those who torture. Everybody wants power and career progression."²¹⁴

Accounts of torture and other ill-treatment are corroborated by the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues who visited Tajikistan in October 2023 and reported:

"The Special Rapporteur also met and spoke online with many Pamiri who had fled the country following the violent events of 2021 and 2022, in addition to a few remaining in the country, who described the threats and abuse, torture and other atrocities committed, particularly in 2022. Their identities are being withheld by the Special Rapporteur for fear of reprisals. What they universally described was an environment of brutality, repression and intimidation, especially since 2021, which belies the commitments of Tajikistan towards a greater respect for and the implementation of international human rights obligations."²¹⁵

4.5.3 UNLAWFUL KILLINGS AND ALLEGED EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTION AFTER TORTURE

In addition to the alleged extrajudicial executions of prominent figures Gulbiddin Ziyobekov and Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov (see section 3.1 above), there are allegations that other less well known Pamiris were targeted and deliberately killed by the order or with the acquiescence of the authorities, in several cases after torture and other ill-treatment.

In Vamar, the main town of Rushan district of GBAO, the security forces cracked down on street protesters in the morning of 18 May 2022 (see above). At the same time, they reportedly started searching houses and arbitrarily arresting male residents. While in detention, several of them were beaten, burnt with cigarette stubs, mutilated, and killed with shots in the head, according to Anora Sarkorova, an exiled journalist credited for providing reliable information based on an extensive network of local sources.²¹⁶

Among those residents of Rushan district of GBAO who were held in custody in the police station on 18 May 2022, according to Sarkorova, the district head of the MIA in Rushan singled out several individuals: Alisher Kimatshoev from Vamar, and four childhood friends Ardasher Munosibov, Munir Nasrulloboev, Nusrat Zavkibekov, and Ehsan Mizrobov from Derzud village. The district head of the MIA had allegedly had prior personal disputes with Kimatshoev, Zavkibekov and Mizrobov. At least one of these five residents reportedly complained of having been unlawfully detained. The district head of the MIA allegedly personally tortured and mutilated Kimatshoev and Munosibov and shot them in the head outside of the police office. The dead bodies of all five residents were reportedly found naked on 19 May 2022, with bullet wounds and traces of torture.²¹⁷

Amnesty International has received images which allegedly show the naked dead bodies of Munosibov, Nasrulloboev, Zavkibekov and Mizrobov. By comparing images of the alleged victims alive with images of the corpses, Amnesty's Crisis Evidence Lab were able to corroborate the identification of Munosibov and Zavkibekov, made by a resident of Rushan district of GBAO.²¹⁸ On the image of Munosibov's dead body, a forensic pathologist determined that a bloodstained face with a raccoon eye was visible. A raccoon eye is a typical marker of a basal skull fracture, often due to a gunshot wound of the head. On images which allegedly show Mizrobov's dead body, the forensic pathologist also determined that a raccoon eye appeared to be present and a wound on the right side of the head was highly suggestive of a gunshot exit wound from a high velocity projectile. The forensic pathologist report supports Sarkorova's account in which Munosibov was killed with a shot in the mouth.²¹⁹

The authorities admitted the death of eight persons they alleged were armed militants during the so-called "anti-terror operation" on 18 May 2022 and denied that any civilians had been physically or materially harmed.²²⁰

²¹⁴ Interview identifier #233, with a former MIA employee, conducted on 25 April 2024 by a video call on condition of anonymity.

²¹⁵ Human Rights Council. Visit to Tajikistan: report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, 13 February 2024, para. 70: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²¹⁶ Anora Sarkorova did extensive research on the 18 May 2022 events in Vamar. Publicly available information about the corpses and the sources has been compiled by the initiative Roof-top Info which documents the crackdown in GBAO: Roof-Top Info, *What is happening in Tajikistan?*, 7 March 2024: <https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/file/background-information-on-the-situation-in-kh/download/Background-information-on-the-situation-in-Khorugh.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²¹⁷ Interview with Anora Sarkorova, conducted on 15 and 18 May 2023 via video call. Part of the information had already been published by Sarkorova on her Telegram channel, 26 March 2023: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/1106>. For details on the detention and the condition of the bodies, see Anora Sarkorova's Telegram channel, 29 May 2022: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/68> (Kimatshoev), <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/318> (Munosibov), Radio Ozodi, "Тела 21 жертвы «контртеррористической операции» в Рушане переданы родным – источники", 20 May 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31859367.html> (Munosibov, Nasrulloboev, Zavkibekov, Mizrobov) (all sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²¹⁸ Interview identifier #217, conducted on 14 June 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²¹⁹ Anora Sarkorova's Telegram channel, "РУШАНСКАЯ РЕЗНЯ - МАЙ 2022 г.", 8 July 2022: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/318> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²²⁰ Khovar, "Пресс-центр Министерства внутренних дел Республики Таджикистан сообщает", 19 May 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/05/press-tsentr-ministerstva-vnutrennih-del-respubliki-tadjikistan-soobshhaet-2/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

4.5.4 CONDITIONS OF IMPRISONMENT

In general, conditions in Tajikistani penitentiary facilities are reportedly harsh and prisons are overcrowded.²²¹ There are consistent reports that the food provided to inmates by the prison administration is insufficient and inadequate. Prisoners have to depend on their families and their wider social network supplying them with food and, if necessary, medicine and medical aid.²²² One resident of Khorugh was detained after May 2022 and transferred to a prison in Dushanbe after a while. A relative who visited him there barely recognized him because he had lost a lot of weight and also his sight.²²³

One interlocutor told to the research team what he had heard from a person who had visited a prisoner:

“[My relative] can get a visit once in three months [for two or three days]. He is in a barrack in the common zone. There are around 200 inmates in a barrack. [...] The situation is more or less [OK] there [compared to the isolation cells of the prisoners serving a life sentence]. [...] You have to pay [a bribe of] US\$ 200 or 300 for a visit, depending on the mood [of the guards]. [...] Relatives can submit products anytime.”²²⁴

Those sentenced to life imprisonment are reportedly held in isolation cells. One interlocutor summarized the information received from a person visiting a Pamiri relative who is serving a life sentence:

“Each day, they can get fresh air only for ten minutes. There are such cells from which you can only go out into a small courtyard, you can walk there and then go back. They [the guards] observe you from above. You can get visit only twice per year, for 24 hours. [This means] you see only the guards for six months. [...] A person who only sees daylight for 10 minutes is psychologically not healthy and will react to provocations. [...] When they go to the courtyard, some employees wait for you with their batons. They should beat you so that you do not forget. Inside the cell, it depends on the mood of the guard. [...] Maybe a drunk guard comes and tortures.”²²⁵

The interlocutor explained that the courtyard is only around 16 square meters, and on weekends life prisoners are not allowed outside at all.

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in the report of her country visit to Tajikistan referred to reports that prisoners were punished for praying outside the mosque or prayer room.²²⁶

According to relatives of two Pamiris who were detained in summer 2022 and sentenced to various prison terms, persons convicted under politically motivated charges are discriminated against inside the prisons and are subjected to six inspections per day instead of the standard two inspections.²²⁷

4.5.5 LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The Constitution of Tajikistan (Article 18) states: “No one may be subjected to torture [and] cruel and inhuman treatment.”²²⁸ An amendment adopted in 2012 defined torture as a criminal act in Article 143(1) of the Criminal Code.²²⁹ However, there has not been any consistent implementation and impunity is widespread for acts of torture and other ill-treatment allegedly committed by the security forces.

Complaints about torture and other ill-treatment are rare because the survivors not only lack trust in the system but are aware of risk of severe reprisals. Even documenting torture is fraught with challenges. When submitted, such complaints hardly, if ever, lead to an effective investigation, and remedies for the harm suffered are ineffective and hardly accessible in practice.²³⁰ One human rights defender in exile explained the lack of effective channels for complaining about torture:

²²¹ U.S. Department of State, 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tajikistan, Section 1c: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/tajikistan/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²²² Interview identifier #227, with the relative of a Pamiri who had been detained in summer 2022, conducted on 24 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. Interview identifier #230, with a Pamiri who had been spent several months in a remand prison and whose relative was detained in summer 2022, conducted on 29 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²²³ Interview identifier #401, with the relative of a Pamiri who had been detained in summer 2022, conducted on 21 October 2022 via video call on condition of anonymity.

²²⁴ Interview identifier #230, with a Pamiri man whose relative was detained in summer 2022 and is serving a life sentence, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²²⁵ Interview identifier #230, with a Pamiri man whose relative was detained in summer 2022 and is serving a life sentence, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²²⁶ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Para. 67: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²²⁷ Interview identifier #210, with a relative of a Pamiri who had been detained in summer 2022, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. Interview identifier #227, with the relative of a Pamiri who had been detained in summer 2022, conducted on 24 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²²⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan, <https://mfa.tj/en/main/tajikistan/constitution> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²²⁹ Criminal Code of the Republic of Tajikistan, available at https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30397325 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²³⁰ U.S. Department of State, 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tajikistan, Section 1c: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/tajikistan/>. In the case of Abdusattor Pirmuhammadzoda, who had complained about torture in a letter from a pretrial detention facility in October 2022, the judge who convicted him requested an investigation, but the Supreme Court of Tajikistan declared in February 2023 that investigations by the Prosecutor General's office had not found any confirmation of the claims of torture: Mullorajab Yusufzoda, “ВС Таджикистана утверждает, что жалобы Пирмухаммадзода на пытки ‘не нашли своего подтверждения’”, Radio Ozodi, 17 February 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32276061.html>. After the suspicious death of Abdukakhkhor Rozikov in detention in Kulyab in

“To whom can they [prisoners] complain? They are told to not say anything to anybody. I do not think it is useful to do it through the government [official channels] because when stories of torture have been revealed, it was done by the media [which had received information] from family members. [...] People who have been tortured cannot even tell their family members about torture [for fear of reprisals], it is only through very accidental moments that they find out. Sometimes the jailed and tortured activists do not share the torture methods of the government because the methods are humiliating. An example of torturing can be an anal penetration by the baton, which the detainees will not share fearing losing their dignity in family and society.”²³¹

After torture by the SCNS, one person went to a doctor in 2018, in what proved to be a futile hope of having his injuries documented and litigated against the perpetrators:

“A broken nose, a swollen face, a bloody hand. The doctor asked me who did it. I replied that it was employees of the SCNS. He turned pale. I asked him to give me a report on the beatings so that I could hire a lawyer and write a complaint. It should not be this way. The doctor replied that he was ready to cure me, but he could not write a conclusion. He admitted that people came to him almost every day with such beatings and the torturers are always the same. [He said:] ‘I understand everything, but I do not want to have problems with the SCNS. Neither for myself nor for my loved ones.’”²³²

Another person interrogated and tortured in GBAO after May 2022 did not undertake such an attempt:

“You cannot complain to anybody. [...] In the hospital nobody will take you, I mean officially. There is nobody whom you could address.”²³³

Shortly after the events in Rushan district on 18 May 2022, members of the Office of the Prosecutor General reportedly questioned local residents but refrained from documenting details about torture and other ill-treatment and alleged extrajudicial executions.²³⁴

4.6 IMPRISONMENT UNDER FABRICATED OR INFLATED CHARGES

Article 9 Paragraph 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) prohibits arbitrary arrest or detention. Article 14 Paragraph 1 requires a “fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law.”

In their joint communication to the authorities of 12 May 2023, however, a group of six special rapporteurs and two UN working groups expressed a number of concerns about unfair trials of human rights defenders in Tajikistan, among them advocates of Pamiri rights such as journalist and activist Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva and lawyers Faromuz Irgashev and Manuchehr Kholiknazarov (see section 4.2 above). These included allegations of torture to extract false confessions, the “overbroad and ambiguous definitions” of some of the provisions used against human rights defenders, and reports of closed trials and restricted access to lawyers.²³⁵

In the report on her country visit to Tajikistan in December 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders summarized:

“Those who spoke up, got organized and investigated and criticized current policies or governing rules have faced criminal charges and received heavy prison sentences following trials that did not meet fair trial standards. As a result of this climate of fear and persecution many are currently being allegedly arbitrarily detained.”²³⁶

4.6.1 UNFAIR TRIALS AND IMPRISONMENT

Before 2021/22, an active civil society and the informal influence of community leaders had had a restraining effect against arbitrary arrests. After the crackdown on civil society and the arbitrary arrests or unlawful killings of informal community leaders in May 2022, numerous local residents were arbitrarily arrested and charged for their peaceful participation in protest events or for otherwise

January 2023 three police officers were indicted: Eurasianet, “Tajikistan: Apparent jail torture death sparks rare show of dissent”, 4 January 2023: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-apparent-jail-torture-death-sparks-rare-show-of-dissent>. The Civil Society Coalition against Torture and Impunity in Tajikistan collected 40 complaints about torture from 2021 to 2022, 8 November 2022: <https://notorture.tj.org/en/news/head-civil-society-coalition-against-torture-and-impunity-tajikistan>. The Ombudsman for Human Rights of Tajikistan reported in February 2022 that he had received 15 complaints about torture in 2021 and claimed that none of them had been confirmed after investigations by the General Prosecutor and meetings of his staff with some of the detainees who had filed complaints: Alisher Zarifi, Barot Yusufi, “Омбудсмен: Ситуация с правами человека в Таджикистане улучшилась. Правозащитники с ним не согласны”, 4 February 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31686110.html> (all sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²³¹ Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

²³² Interview identifier #101, with a Pamiri man held in custody several years before 2022, conducted on 5 March 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²³³ Interview identifier #213, with a Pamiri man held in custody several years after May 2022, conducted on 19 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²³⁴ Anora Sarkorova’s Telegram channel, “КАК ЭТО БЫЛО - РУШАНСКАЯ РЕЗНЯ. МАЙ 2022 г. СВИДЕТЕЛЬСТВА ОЧЕВИДЦЕВ”, 18 September 2023, <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/1447> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²³⁵ Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 12 May 2023: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28026> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²³⁶ Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024, Para. 59: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. They were typically charged with offences which fall under the following chapters of the Criminal Code:

Chapter 21 (“Crimes against public safety”), in particular Article 187 Criminal Code²³⁷ (organization of a criminal group or participation in a criminal group). Most of these offences are defined as terrorism-related (Article 1 No. 14 Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Counteracting Terrorism). Typically, individuals were arbitrarily charged with such offenses for exercising their rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

Chapter 29 (“Crimes against the fundamentals of the constitutional order and the security of the state”), in particular Article 307 Criminal Code (public calls for the overthrow of the constitutional order), Article 307(2) Criminal Code (organization of an extremist group) and Article 307(3) Criminal Code (organization of activities of an extremist organization). Often individuals were charged with such offenses for exercising their right to freedom of expression.²³⁸

Chapter 31 (“Crimes against the order of administration”), in particular Article 328 Criminal Code (violence against state officials) and Article 330 Criminal Code (insults against state officials). In many cases, individuals charged with such offenses had verbally or physically reacted to provocations by security officers.

In a joint communication to the Government of Tajikistan in January 2023, several UN special rapporteurs raised concerns about the overly broad definition of terrorism in the Criminal Code and the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Combating Terrorism which had been in force until December 2021.²³⁹ Specifically regarding Article 187 of the Criminal Code, the UN experts raised concerns that by its broad nature, it “may directly or indirectly criminalise the peaceful exercise of freedom of association and assembly and may create a chilling effect on civil society engaged in non-violent criticism of state policies.”²⁴⁰ In response to these and other communications, the Tajikistani authorities submitted information on the situation in GBAO to OHCHR in May 2023, denying that the definition of terrorism in Tajikistani legislation was overly broad.²⁴¹

Most trials were held behind closed doors and proceedings or verdicts have not been made accessible.²⁴² The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, based on information gained in the framework of her country visit to Tajikistan in December 2022, commented on the different obstructions for those wishing to attend court trials:

“In reality however, there are several obstacles and practical impediments to accessing court proceedings, including that the dates of the hearings are not announced on the court websites, schedules are subject to change and the court facilities do not have the capacity to accommodate observers, family members and the media. Trial dates are often communicated only 30 minutes before the hearing. Additionally, trials are often ruled to be secret, even if the grounds for closing such hearings to the public may be questionable. [...] Sometimes court hearings are open in theory, but take place in closed institutions, such as pretrial detention facilities (SIZOs). The public and the media are in practice excluded from attending such trials, as these detention facilities are not open for the public, family members or the media.”²⁴³

²³⁷ Criminal Code of the Republic of Tajikistan, available at https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30397325 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²³⁸ In the report on her country visit to Tajikistan in December 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders noted that “the authorities continued to make use of articles of the Criminal Code to bring charges of ‘incitement to discord’ and ‘terrorism and extremism’ against journalists and bloggers who had published critical material on politically sensitive topics”: Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024, Par. 38: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²³⁹ The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Combating Terrorism (available at <https://mfa.tj/ru/main/view/3959/zakon-respubliki-tadzhikistan-o-borbe-s-terrorizmom>, last accessed on 23 August 2024), which had been in force until December 2021 when it was replaced by the new Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Counteracting Terrorism (available at https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=39290953&pos=5;-106#pos=5;-106, last accessed on 23 August 2024), had provided for exceptional powers, emergency measures and violations of due process like closed trials (Article 18). The UN experts had critically commented on their potential “negative and disproportionate impact [...] on particular groups, on due process, on the right to liberty and security of person, which may lead to enforced or involuntary disappearances; as well as on the exercise of freedom of opinion and expression, and freedom of peaceful assembly and association”: Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 23 January 2023, p. 1: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27787> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁴⁰ Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 23 January 2023, p. 12: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27787> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁴¹ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Tajikistan To The UN Office And Other International Organizations In Geneva, Information regarding the events in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR), 15 May 2023, p. 3: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=37600> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁴² HRW, “Tajikistan: Autonomous Region Protesters Denied Fair Trials”, 23 August 2022: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/23/tajikistan-autonomous-region-protesters-denied-fair-trials> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁴³ Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024, Paras. 83-84: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

Many trials were rushed, lasting only for few days.²⁴⁴ In many cases, they were held without due process,²⁴⁵ and lawyers were prevented from sharing any details publicly.²⁴⁶ Anora Sarkorova, based on her sources, reported that numerous confessions were extorted.²⁴⁷ Many defendants did not have any legal representation of their choice or no legal representation at all due to the legal disenfranchisement of Pamiris.²⁴⁸ This reflects the concerns regarding undue pressure on lawyers and unfair trial previously documented by Amnesty International²⁴⁹ and the UN Human Rights Committee.²⁵⁰ The lack of independence of the judiciary, widespread corruption and pressure from the executive branch have been noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders in the report on her country visit to Tajikistan in December 2022.²⁵¹

An interlocutor was informed by a relative about difficulties with finding a lawyer for a relative who had been detained in 2022:

“My [relative] approached several lawyers in Dushanbe. When they heard [about the case], they refused. One [...] lawyer said: ‘It is useless to spend any money [on legal support] because they [the security forces and authorities] will do whatever they want.’ [...] Nobody accepted the case, he did not have any lawyer. [...] There was only one court session [and it took place inside] a remand prison [in Dushanbe]. [...] The judge opened an envelope and read out the prison terms [for several defendants]. [...] My [relative] told me, who had visited [the imprisoned relative] and got [the information] from him.”²⁵²

In many cases, even the charges were not made public. One Pamiri human rights defender in exile who was closely monitoring the high-profile court cases recalls:

“The procedures were blurry and opaque. It was almost impossible to get any information. We were just collecting the words from the family members. [...] But [many] family members want to avoid trouble and therefore do not want to speak to anybody outside of the country [Tajikistan], considering that [some people] had been charged with receiving funds from abroad. [...] [As far as Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, Faromuz Irgashev and others are concerned], the government put the secrecy label on their cases, and the lawyers were acting in a strange way without informing the family members. [...] The Supreme Court rendered the verdicts [in December 2022]. Something had been happening in summer 2022 and in October 2022. My suspicion is that the district court and then the Dushanbe city court [pronounced their judgements]. For example there was a court hearing at the beginning of October 2022 and we got information about it only when the family members received the invitation one day before the hearing. However, no further details were shared and we only had to guess what was the level of the court. When the Supreme Court rendered the verdict, we even did not know the exact charges. We found out only in January 2023 when the Prosecutor General made a public statement [on their cases].”²⁵³

²⁴⁴ Eurasianet, “Tajikistan: Pamiri activists imprisoned en masse”, 11 August 2022: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-pamiri-activists-imprisoned-en-masse>. For example, Muzaffar Davlatmirov, a renowned cleric in Khorugh, was convicted and sentenced in August 2022 within nine days after his detention: RFE/RL’s Tajik Service, “Religious Cleric In Restive Tajik Region Gets Five Years On Extremism Charges”, 5 August 2022: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-badakhshan-cleric-five-years/31975340.html> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch, Tajikistan: Autonomous Region Protesters Denied Fair Trials, August 23, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/23/tajikistan-autonomous-region-protesters-denied-fair-trials>.

²⁴⁶ In the report on her country visit to Tajikistan, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders spelled out concerns with due process for few selected cases of Pamiri human rights defenders: Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). The case of Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva was classified and she had limited access to her lawyer, who was placed under a non-disclosure order (Par. 50). Manuchehr Kholiknazarov did reportedly not have access to lawyers and the evidence used against him (Par. 54). Khushruz Djumaev’s trial was reportedly held behind closed doors in a SCNS pretrial detention center, his case was classified as secret and his lawyer was placed under a non-disclosure order (Par. 58).

²⁴⁷ Anora Sarkorova’s Telegram channel, 13 June 2022: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/156> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁴⁸ There was only a very small number of registered lawyers based in GBAO, two of whom were detained during the May 2022 crackdown, whereas lawyers in the capital, Dushanbe, were hesitant to defend Pamiris, fearing negative consequences: ICJ, “Tajikistan: detained protesters should be given immediate access to lawyers”, 1 August 2022: <https://www.icj.org/tajikistan-detained-protesters-should-be-given-immediate-access-to-lawyers/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁴⁹ In recent years, lawyers in Tajikistan have faced reprisals from the government for defending effectively clients in politically-motivated cases, and some have been prosecuted and imprisoned under false charges. In 2015, the authorities legislated to force all licensed lawyers to re-take professional qualifications. This resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of licensed lawyers by more than 50 per cent: Amnesty International, *Tajikistan: In the line of duty. Harassment, prosecution and imprisonment of lawyers in Tajikistan*, 23 May 2017 (Index Number: EUR 60/6266/2017), pp. 10-11, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur60/6266/2017/en/>.

²⁵⁰ In its concluding observations in 2019, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed its concern about “allegations of unfair trials, including violations of equality of arms between the defence and the prosecution; a bias in favour of the prosecution, violation of the presumption of innocence and an extremely low acquittal rate (about 0.1 per cent in 2018), unfair trials, closed to the public, in the case of the leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party, and closed trials in cases not involving national security charges (arts. 2 and 14)”: Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Tajikistan, 22 August 2019, par. 37: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2F%2FTJK%2FCO%2F3&Lang=en. In the report on her country visit to Tajikistan in April 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief noted that “most lawyers are unwilling to take up the cases of religious detainees because of the risks to the lawyer”: Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Par. 69: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf>. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders similarly noted in the report on her country visit in December 2022 that “lawyers, in particular those working on what are deemed sensitive human rights issues, are frequently invited to informal questioning sessions by the police and the security apparatus. This is usually done without any summons or warrant, and in some cases the questioning has lasted hours.”: Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024, Par. 85: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (all sources last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁵¹ Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024, Paras. 77-78: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁵² Interview identifier #230, with a Pamiri man whose relative was detained in summer 2022, conducted on 29 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁵³ Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

In that statement, the Prosecutor General reacted to international criticism and laid out the charges against several individuals, among them the most prominent members of the Commission of 44.²⁵⁴

THE COMMISSION OF 44

The Commission of 44 was a group of citizens formed during the November 2021 protest in Khorugh to monitor the investigation into the killings of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov and two protesters, and mediate between the authorities and the Pamiri population. Many of the most respected and active lawyers, intellectuals and civil society representatives joined the Commission of 44. During the May 2022 crackdown, its most prominent members were arbitrarily detained and later convicted and sentenced following manifestly unfair trials. Members of the Commission of 44 were charged with Article 187 of the Criminal Code (organization of a criminal community), in violation of their rights to freedom of expression and association. The Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs called the Commission of 44 a “criminal group” in April 2023.²⁵⁵ For the following members of the Commission of 44, the accusations and sentences were publicly communicated by the General Prosecutor’s office²⁵⁶:

Faromuz Irgashev:²⁵⁷ convicted on the basis of Article 187, attempted murder, Article 179 (terrorism), and Article 307(3) Criminal Code (organization of activities of an extremist organization) and sentenced to 29 years in prison;

Manuchehr Kholiknazarov:²⁵⁸ convicted on the basis of Article 187 and Article 307(3) Criminal Code and sentenced to 16 years in prison;

Khursand Mamadshoev: convicted on the basis of Article 187 and Article 307(3) Criminal Code and sentenced to 16 years in prison;

Muzaffar Mubarakshoev: convicted on the basis of Article 187, Article 104, Article 179 (terrorism), and Article 307(3) Criminal Code and sentenced 29 years in prison.

Addressing the arbitrary arrests and detentions of, among others, Manuchehr Kholiknazarov and Faromuz Irgashev, UN special rapporteurs in a joint communication to the Government of Tajikistan in May 2023 expressed “serious concerns about the apparent pattern of using extremism- and terrorism-related charges against human rights defenders and minority activists, particularly those defending the rights of the Pamiri minority, allegedly to discredit them and justify further secrecy around their cases.”²⁵⁹ In March 2024, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention of the UN HRC adopted the opinion that the deprivation of liberty of Faromuz Irgashev, Manuchehr Kholiknazarov and Khursand Mamadshoev was arbitrary.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁴ Prosecutor General’s Office, “Прокуратураи генералӣ мақолаҳои иғвоангезро рад менамояд”, 18 May 2023: : the original link (<https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1822-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-505.html>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on: <http://web.archive.org/web/20230518165252/https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1822-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-505.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁵⁵ Speech of Abdurahmon Alamshozoda, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Tajikistan, during the 2971st Meeting, 109th Session of the UN CERD Committee on 20 April 2023, min. 02:25:33 (the original link no longer accessible: <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1v/k1v3evdxxl>, accessed April 2023). Translation from the Russian original by the authors.

²⁵⁶ Prosecutor General’s Office, “Прокуратураи генералӣ мақолаҳои иғвоангезро рад менамояд”, 18 May 2023: : the original link (<https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1822-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-505.html>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on: <http://web.archive.org/web/20230518165252/https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1822-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-505.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁵⁷ Catherine Putz, “What Tajikistan’s Persecution of Faromuz Irgashev Really Means”, 2 December 2022: <https://thediomat.com/2022/12/what-tajikistans-persecution-of-faromuz-irgashev-really-means/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁵⁸ International Federation for Human Rights (fidh), “Tajikistan: Arbitrary detention of lawyers Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, Faromuz Irgashev and Khursand Mamadshoev”, 15 June 2022: <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/tajikistan-arbitrary-detention-of-lawyers-manuchehr-kholiknazarov>, <https://lawyersforlawyers.org/en/statement-on-the-arrest-of-the-lawyers-manuchehr-kholiknazarov-and-faromuz-irgashev/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁵⁹ Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteurs’ joint letter to the Government of Tajikistan, 12 May 2023, p. 11: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28026>. Kholiknazarov’s case had already been addressed in a joint communication in July 2022: Joint address to the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, 13 July 2022: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27423>. Both cases had been addressed in a joint communication in October 2022: Joint address to the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Special Rapporteur on minority issues and the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, 4 October 2022: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27560> (all sources last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁶⁰ Human Rights Council, “Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its ninety-ninth session, 18–27 March 2024”, 4 June 2024: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/detention-wg/opinions/session99/a-hrc-wgad-2024-19-tajikistan-aev.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

4.6.2 LITTLE PUBLIC INFORMATION ON PROSECUTIONS

Official information on convictions is scarce. One notable exception is a press release by the Office of the Prosecutor General which stated in October 2022 that as a result of the events on 18 May 2022 in Rushan district, 77 residents of the district had been sentenced for criminal offences, investigations were ongoing in 32 cases, and 89 individuals had been fined for administrative offences.²⁶¹

In June 2023 the news portal Pamir Inside published a list of 205 Pamiri individuals who had been convicted since November 2021.²⁶² The list is based on information collected by volunteers from relatives, neighbours and other residents of the convicted persons. By February 2024, the list contained the names of 222 individuals. It was apparently incomplete.²⁶³ On 17 June 2022, the government reported that 220 persons had been detained in the framework of the so-called “special operation” in GBAO since mid-May 2022 alone, excluding the period before mid-May 2022 and the period after 17 June 2022.²⁶⁴

The research team has compiled its own registry of detainees based on the list published by Pamir Inside. The information about detainees has been corroborated and complemented on the basis of compilation of publicly available data gathered by the initiative Roof-top Info.²⁶⁵ Cases on which information from more than two sources was available were categorized as corroborated. Whenever there was contradictory information about the sentence, the official source was given preference.²⁶⁶ Eight potential duplicates were excluded,²⁶⁷ resulting in a registry of 214 cases. These included 110 corroborated cases, and 104 cases on which the list published by Pamir Inside was the only source.

The court trials did not result in any known acquittals, which are extremely rare in any criminal trials in Tajikistan and which indicates a lack of independence of the judiciary.²⁶⁸ On 23 May 2022, the MIA published two lists of 27 individuals who had been detained in Rushan district²⁶⁹ and 19 individuals who allegedly had voluntarily surrendered to the authorities.²⁷⁰ All of these 46 individuals in Rushan district, about whose detention official information is available, are included in the list of convicted persons published by Pamir Inside. As far as individuals detained in Khorugh throughout 2022 are concerned, the MIA on its website published information about seven cases of detention or allegedly voluntary surrender and the related charges, which is a fraction of the 75 known detentions (including 52 corroborated).²⁷¹ Each of these seven individuals was later convicted and is included in the list of convicted individuals published by Pamir Inside.

²⁶¹ Prosecutor General's Office, “Маълумотҳои бардурӯғи иғвоангезон дар САҲА 2022”, 8 October 2022: the original link (<https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1639-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-485.html>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on: <http://web.archive.org/web/20240302194719/https://www.prokuratura.tj/news-tj/1639-alasai-ayati-mushovara-dar-prokuraturai-general-485.html> (as of 22 August 2022).

²⁶² Pamir Inside, “Почему репрессии в отношении выходцев из ГБАО – преступление против человечности? Список осужденных”, 4 July 2023: <https://pamirinside.org/pamiris-prisoner-list-2022/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁶³ One interlocutor was aware of convictions of two Pamiris in 2022 which were not recorded in the list published by Pamir Inside: Interview identifier #225, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 21 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

²⁶⁴ Khovar, “Межведомственный штаб сообщает: Полностью прекращена деятельность организованных террористических групп на территории ГБАО”, 17 June 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/06/mezhvedomstvennyj-shtab-soobshhaet-polnostyu-prekrashhena-deyatelnost-organizovannyh-terroristicheskikh-grupp-na-territorii-gbao/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁶⁵ Roof-Top Info, *What is happening in Tajikistan?*, 7 March 2024: <https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/file/background-information-on-the-situation-in-kh/download/Background-information-on-the-situation-in-Khorugh.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁶⁶ For example, Anora Sarkorova published the photos of various official paperwork containing lists of prisoners taken in detention facilities which contained information about the prison terms and convictions of some prisoners: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/840> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁶⁷ In the typical case, the last name and the place of residence are identical and only the first name differs. Unless additional data from other sources is available, it was impossible to decide whether there was a duplicate or several members of the same family had been detained. Such cases were excluded as potential duplicates.

²⁶⁸ In 2020, the International Commission of Jurists, reporting on a mission to Tajikistan conducted in 2019, emphasized that “the acquittal rate in criminal trials appears to be close to zero”: ICJ, *Neither Check nor Balance: The Judiciary in Tajikistan. ICJ Mission Report*, December 2020, p. 63: <https://icj2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Tajikistan-Judiciary-Publications-Reports-Mission-report-2020-ENG.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁶⁹ Official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, которые были установлены и задержаны”, 7 July 2022: the original link (<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34125-r-jkhati-a-zojoni-gur-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terroristii-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-soli-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirokdoshta-ki-muajyan-va-dastgir-karda-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on: <http://web.archive.org/web/20220707170854/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34125-r-jkhati-a-zojoni-gur-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terroristii-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-soli-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirokdoshta-ki-muajyan-va-dastgir-karda-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022).

²⁷⁰ Official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Список членов организованной преступно-экстремистско-террористической группы, участвовавших в митингах 15-18 мая 2022 года в Рушанском районе, добровольно явившихся к властям”, 29 June 2022: the original link (<https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2>) no longer accessible, the post can be accessed on: <http://web.archive.org/web/20220629151437/https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34116-rujkhati-a-zojoni-guru-oi-mutashakkili-inoyat-va-ekstremist-terrorist-ki-dar-tazo-uroti-sana-oi-15-18-maji-2022-dar-no-iyai-r-shon-ishtirok-doshta-bo-ikhtijori-khud-ba-ma-omot-ozir-shudaand-2> (as of 22 August 2022).

²⁷¹ Iftikhor Saidbekov on 10 March 2022: <https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/33697-khabari-matbuoti-rvkd-dar-vmkb-2> (last accessed on 12 April 2023, no longer available). Manuchehr Sherov on 31 March 2022: <https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/33821-sherov-manuche-r-baroi-avboshi-oyash-dastgir-shud-2> (last accessed on 12 April 2023, no longer available). Khurshedsho Sultonshoev on 12 April 2022: <https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/33901-khabari-markazi-robota-oi-am-iyatii-rajosat-i-kdam-t-dar-vmkb-2> (last accessed on 12 April 2023, no longer available); the report published by the state news agency Khovar republished the text referring to the SCNS press release: Khovar, “Центр общественных связей Управления ГКНБ РТ по ГБАО сообщает”, 12 April 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/04/tsentr-obshhestvennyh-svyazey-upravleniya-gknb-rt-po-gbao-soobshhaet/> - last accessed on 23 August 2024). Mirzoshoh Aynalishoev on 1 June 2022: <https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34170-khudi-rorshav-va-ozir-shu6dani-ajnalishoev-ba-militsiya-2> (last accessed on 12 April 2023, no longer available; the text can be retrieved at <http://web.archive.org/web/20231219054705/https://www.vkd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34170-khudi-rorshav-va-ozir-shu6dani-ajnalishoev-ba-militsiya-2>).

Official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, “Добровольное признание Айналишоева и явка с повинной в милицию”, 19 December 2023, accessed on 23 August 2024). Tolib Ayombekov, Munavvar Shanбиеv and Niyozsho Gulobov on 11 June 2022: <https://mvd.tj/index.php/ru/sobytiya/34215-sitodi-bajniidoravii-ta-mini-amniyat-va-tartiboti-am-iyat-dar-vmkb-khabar-medi-ad-2> (last accessed on 12 April 2023, no longer available; the state news agency Khovar republished the text, referring to the MIA press release: Khovar, “Межведомственный штаб по обеспечению безопасности и общественного порядка в ГБАО сообщает”, 11 June 2022:

In the research team's registry, the charges on which individuals have been convicted fall into the following categories: Chapter 21 of the Criminal Code ("Crimes against public safety") – 70 cases (31 corroborated), Chapter 29 ("Crimes against the fundamentals of the constitutional order and the security of the state") – 39 (23), Chapter 31 ("Crimes against the order of administration") – 13 (8), other charges – 6 (4), and unknown charges – 86 (44).

Seventy out of 128 individuals (55 percent), in whose cases information about the charges is available, were convicted of at least one offence against public safety. 39 individuals (30 percent) were not convicted of any offence against public safety but of at least one offence against the constitutional order and the security of the state.

Data on the prison term is available for 168 individuals. Of these 168 individuals, eleven were sentenced to life imprisonment.

The high-profile defendants, known for their human rights work on behalf of Pamiris in the wake of the protests, included journalist and activist Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva, lawyers Faromuz Irgashev and Manuchehr Kholiknazarov, blogger Khushruz Jumaev and activist Muzaffar Mubarakshoev. They were all convicted and sentenced to long prison terms following closed trials. Thus, Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva was given a 21-year prison sentence on charges of incitement to overthrow the government; her brother and former husband were also prosecuted and sentenced to 18 years and a life sentence respectively.²⁷² In March 2024, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention of the UN HRC adopted opinions determining that the deprivation of liberty of Ulfatkhonim Mamadshoeva,²⁷³ Faromuz Irgashev and Manuchehr Kholiknazarov²⁷⁴ was arbitrary.

In all known cases in which Pamiris appealed their convictions of crimes against the public safety or against the constitutional order or the security of the state, their convictions and sentences were upheld.²⁷⁵

4.7 COERCED PUBLIC STATEMENTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY

The authorities repeatedly and indiscriminately coerced and blackmailed residents to make statements to discredit and denigrate well-known community members and denounce protest activities. After the November 2021 protests, dozens, possibly hundreds, of local people had to read out respective texts, or make their own statements to the same effect, in front of a camera. These statements were then broadcast on regional TV. The victims of this practice were typically members of the Pamiri communities over whom the authorities had some leverage, such as employees of state institutions, including educational institutions, employees of companies depending on state funding or state permits, and applicants for public services.²⁷⁶

One Pamiri man was working for a state institution in GBAO during the period after November 2021 and recalls that time:

"They [the security forces] came [almost] every day and said that we should give an interview against these [informal community leaders]. When we said that we did not want to speak, they replied that they would prepare the text. When some people said that their eyesight was bad, they replied that they would write it in big letters. [...] On the one hand, there was the SCNS. They needed results. When somebody had given an interview to the SCNS officers and the police [MIA] found out, they also came and demanded from that person that they gave [an interview] to them as well. 'It will be a problem for us, give [an interview] to us as well.' [It is because] they [SCNS and MIA] are competing with each other. They [the MIA officers] addressed the person directly or their supervisor. [...] [One person] said such [diplomatic] words that people should not listen to Mamadbokir [Mamadbokirov]. They [the officers] switched off the camera and said that he [Mamadbokirov] was a terrorist, that he was getting on everybody's nerves. He agreed [and repeated it in front of the camera]. They did not come to [that person] again, and [that person] is now working normally. [...] Those who did not agree, [many of them] either quit their jobs or left. [...] [One young guy] was coerced by [a high-level official]: 'You are young, come on, we will be in one team.' And he [the official] also threatened him: 'You have kids...' They forced him and he gave the interview. [...] [As far as I am concerned,] I said that I would not get involved. They said: 'If we start digging, we will find [compromising information]. We will get you imprisoned. We have to get an interview from you in any case. Or are you with those outlaws?' I said that I was just doing my job honestly, that I was neither on this nor on that side. Then they came again, my supervisor also said: 'You are with us, aren't you? Just say these words. Or are you afraid of [an informal community leader]?' I said

<https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/06/mezhvedomstvennyi-shtab-po-obespecheniyu-bezopasnosti-i-obshhestvennogo-poryadka-v-gbao-soobshhaet/>, last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁷² Eurasianet, "Tajikistan: Respected journalist sentenced to 21 years in prison", 12 December 2022: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-respected-journalist-sentenced-to-21-years-in-prison>, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32170517.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁷³ Human Rights Council, Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its ninety-ninth session, 18–27 March 2024, 5 June 2024: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/detention-wg/opinions/session99/a-hrc-wgad-2024-18-tajikistan-aev.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁷⁴ Human Rights Council, Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its ninety-ninth session, 18–27 March 2024, 4 June 2024:

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/detention-wg/opinions/session99/a-hrc-wgad-2024-19-tajikistan-aev.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁷⁵ Chorshanbe Chorshanбиеv (July 2022, Dushanbe City Court): Mullorajab Yusufzoda, "8,5 лет заключения. Суд оставил приговор Чоршанбиеву без изменений", Radio Ozodi, 3 July 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31926839.html>; Tohir Abdolbekov (GBAO Regional Court, March 2023): Mirzonabi Holikzod, "Суд ГБАО оставил без изменений приговор Тохиру Абдолбекову", 17 March 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32322455.html> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁷⁶ This was reported by the local news portal Pamir Inside which is known for its credible sources in GBAO: Pamir Inside, "Как бюджетников из ГБАО заставляют давать интервью в поддержку властей", 16 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/как-бюджетников-из-гбао-заставляют-да-> The practice and its impact were also described by an anonymous author from GBAO, in December 2021: Pamir Inside, "О ситуации в ГБАО. Какое морально-психологическое давление испытывает население региона", 29 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/о-ситуации-в-гбао-какое-морально-психологическое-давление-испытывает-население-региона/>, 29 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/о-ситуации-в-гбао-какое-морально-психологическое-давление-испытывает-население-региона/> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

that I could simply not say an untruth. It was just not true. I did know those people [the informal community leaders whom the authorities wanted to denigrate]. [...] The state is terrorizing the people. I cannot afford doing this, saying [publicly] that they are right when they are killing my brothers [neighbours and peers]. [...] Everybody reacted negatively [when somebody had given an interview]. [One person] came drunk [after giving an interview], told us that he had to work: 'If I lose the job, then how [to survive] and where [to go]?' We railed at him a bit. Nobody talked to him. [...] Of course, I consider them [who gave interviews] to be traitors. And many others think so as well."²⁷⁷

By creating moral dilemmas and exposing the victims to social ostracism from their families and their wider community, the coercion inflicted severe mental suffering. The independent newspaper AsiaPlus documented the cases of two school teachers from Roshtkala district of GBAO who faced problems within their families and with their neighbours after they had been coerced to read out video statements.²⁷⁸ One anonymous employee of the state administration was quoted in December 2021 by Pamir Daily, a news portal which is known for its credible sources in GBAO (later rebranded as Pamir Inside after being arbitrarily banned by the Supreme Court of Tajikistan):

"If they [the SCNS officers] had said that they would only get me dismissed [from my job], I would have agreed. But they said that they would investigate into all our work, and mentioned that they would prosecute me for misappropriation of state property. [...] But we understand that they can fabricate a criminal case against you and we cannot defend ourselves. There is no independent court or investigation here. We are very stressed. On the one side our relatives pressure us, they call from Russia and say that the people are cursing us in the internet, on the other side the SCNS is exerting pressure."²⁷⁹

An article published by Pamir Daily News in January 2022 described the impact of that practice:

"Anybody who makes a [video] statement runs a great risk of losing authority in the eyes of the community, in the eyes of his family, of his acquaintances, and becomes an object of discussions and reprehension. In the Pamirs, where historically the whole life and existence of each individual depends on his social network, being rejected by your community, by your loved ones is the worst punishment. [...] The purpose of these speeches is to divide the population even more, to the extent that families are destroyed, parents and children quarrel with each other, people commit suicide, long-term hatred between clans (avlods) forms, the reputation of people who are respected in their communities is damaged [...]"²⁸⁰

One Pamiri living in GBAO during the first months of 2022 recalls:

"When we came to [our workplace] every morning, [somebody] switched on the TV [to find out] who had given an interview today. The [relative] of [one colleague] worked for a government institution. He gave an interview. Everybody was telling [the colleague] that he should not have given [the interview]. The [colleague] said that they [the security forces] had threatened him so much, that if he did not give the interview, he would not find any work anywhere here. He had [..., a certain number of] children and was living in a village. There was so much pressure. [...] Everybody was under stress, [it was] a very difficult year."²⁸¹

To resist the coercion and evade the leverage of the authorities, many Pamiris in GBAO quit their jobs in state institutions.²⁸²

4.8 THREATS OF ABDUCTION AND FORCIBLE RETURN FROM RUSSIA

Under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. It prohibits states from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction or effective control when there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution, torture, ill-treatment or other serious human rights violations.²⁸³

In spite of this prohibition, however, after the November 2021 protest in front of the Embassy of Tajikistan in Moscow, and increasingly after the May 2022 crackdown in GBAO, the Russian authorities forcibly returned political activists from GBAO or facilitated their forcible return by the security forces of Tajikistan. Among those targeted was the leadership of Pomerebutsen, the informal diaspora

²⁷⁷ Interview identifier #219, with one Pamiri with work experience in a state institution, conducted on 3 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

²⁷⁸ Asia-plus, "Two female teachers from GBAO's Roshtkala district say they were forced to condemn the Khorog rally", 20 January 2022: <https://asiaplus.tj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20220120/two-female-teachers-from-gbaos-roshtkala-district-say-they-were-forced-to-condemn-the-khorog-rally> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁷⁹ Pamir Inside, "Как бюджетников из ГБАО заставляют давать интервью в поддержку властей", 16 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/как-бюджетников-из-гбао-заставляют-да> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). Translation from the Russian original by the authors.

²⁸⁰ Pamir Inside, "В чем цель выступлений на ТВ «Бадахшон» и как с этим бороться. Мнение читателя", 31 January 2022: <https://pamirinside.org/в-чем-цель-выступлений-на-тв-бадахшон> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). Translation from the Russian original by the authors.

²⁸¹ Interview identifier #222, with a Pamiri living in Khorugh during the first months of 2022, conducted on 13 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

²⁸² Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, "A Growing Split in Society in GBAO Amid Authorities' Propaganda Campaign", 3 February 2022, <https://cabar.asia/en/?p=51099> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). An article on the analytical platform CABAR.asia mentioned the cases of several people who quitted or were considering to quit their jobs in government agencies.

²⁸³ OHCHR, "The principle of non-refoulement under international human rights law", <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf> (last accessed on 9 August 2024).

organization of Pamiris in Russia. One Pamiri man who spent several months in Moscow and was acquainted with several of the influential figures of the Pamiri diaspora in Russia explained:

“Pomerebutsen was a network of volunteers [in Russia]. They kept order at weddings and other events. Whenever there was any problem which involved Pamiris, for example when there was a conflict with other ethnic groups, when somebody was cheated by their employer, Pomerebutsen helped to solve it. The most influential figures were Oraz Vazirbekov and Amriddin Alovatshoev. The elders of [the communities from] the different districts [and municipalities in GBAO] were organized in a messenger group and met whenever necessary to make joint decisions. [...] They [the Tajikistani authorities] do not like it when Pamiris are united and unanimous. [One source] has told me that they already started in the 2010s to persecute and intimidate [the Pamiri diaspora networks in Russia]. [...] They were afraid of something. They were scared of us.”²⁸⁴

Another Pamiri man who had been part of the Pomerebutsen network elaborated:

“They [the Tajikistani authorities] did not like that [...] the Pamiris were becoming one family. The people started praising us, therefore they [the authorities] started to somehow destroy this structure. [...] Previously, the public organization Nur [the AKDN-sponsored Ismaili community centre] and the ambassador [of Tajikistan] had been expected to solve such kind of issues, but they had not solved them. It was us who solved them, and the people supported us and ceased approaching them. [...] We did not care about the ambassador, we only listened to our own leaders. [...] They [the authorities] were fearing for their power [and control]. [...] Nobody supported us, we relied on ourselves, did not depend [on anybody]. [...] The security forces wanted to kidnap our leaders so that the only way was through the Embassy, so that only the authorities solved the issues of their citizens. [...] They wanted to turn everything over, so that nobody could go against them.”²⁸⁵

The athlete Chorshanbe Chorshanbiev was deported by the Russian authorities in December 2021, and then sentenced to eight-and-a-half year's imprisonment on charges of inciting ethnic hatred and unrest. He had been known for emphasizing publicly his Pamiri identity, and for urging people in Tajikistan “to stand up against injustice and against the unjust death of innocent people” following the November 2021 protests in Khorugh.²⁸⁶ Activist and community leader Amriddin Alovatshoev, one of the leading figures of Pomerebutsen, was abducted in Russia in January 2022 and forcibly disappeared for several weeks,²⁸⁷ before subsequently reappearing in custody in Tajikistan and being sentenced in April 2022 to 18 years' imprisonment. Oraz Vazirbekov and Ramzi Vazirbekov, two other key figures of Pomerebutsen, were abducted at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in July 2022²⁸⁸ and subsequently sentenced to 16 and 13 years' imprisonment respectively. In total, at least a dozen affected individuals from GBAO were detained immediately after arrival in Dushanbe, reportedly tortured, and sentenced to long prison terms.²⁸⁹ One Pamiri man who was staying in Moscow during the first months of 2022 and often communicated with Oraz Vazirbekov recalls:

“They [the Tajikistani security forces] first made efforts to catch our elders, those whom we [respected and] listened to. Amriddin [Alovatshoev in February 2022], Ruslan [Pulodbekov in July 2022], Oraz [Vazirbekov in July 2022] [and others]. [...] They were the first ones whom they kidnapped [or got extradited]. Then they started searching for us. [...] There was one attempt to kidnap Jonibek [Chorshanbiev, at that time the elder of the community of Khorugh in Russia]. This happened after Amriddin [Alovatshoev] had been kidnapped and Jonibek had given his speech [on behalf of the community of Khorugh] in the video message [criticizing the disappearance of Alovatshoev]. I remember one meeting of elders after that incident. Oraz [Vazirbekov] shouted at them [Jonibek Chorshanbiev, Muslim Navruzov and some other elders], he was really angry. He said that he had told them so often that they must leave [Russia], that they [the Tajikistani security forces] would kidnap them or take them from here. [...] When Muslim [Navruzov] and Jonibek [Chorshanbiev] were actually arrested [in June 2022], Oraz [Vazirbekov] was very nervous and [made many attempts to save them], but nothing worked out.”²⁹⁰

²⁸⁴ Interview identifier #221, with a Pamiri man who spent several months in Moscow in 2022, conducted on 14 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

²⁸⁵ Interview identifier #229, with a Pamiri person who had been part of the Pomerebutsen network, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. The interlocutor made reference to the Tajik community organizer and human rights defender Izzat Amon who had already been abducted in Moscow and forcibly transferred to Tajikistan in March 2021, emphasizing parallels between his case and Pomerebutsen: Front Line Defenders, “Izzat Amon abducted in Moscow and transferred to Tajikistan, facing charges of fraud”, updated on 2 April 2021: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/izzat-amon-abducted-moscow-and-transferred-tajikistan-facing-charges-fraud> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁸⁶ Eurasianet, “Tajikistan: MMA fighter's pro-Pamiri remarks land him behind bars”, 4 January, 2022: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-mma-fighters-pro-pamiri-remarks-land-him-behind-bars> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁸⁷ HRW, “Tajikistan: Restore Internet in Autonomous Region”, 7 February 2022: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/07/tajikistan-restore-internet-autonomous-region> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁸⁸ Catherine Putz, “Pair of Pamiri Activists Disappear From Russia and Reappear in Tajikistan”, The Diplomat, 3 August 2022: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/pair-of-pamiri-activists-disappear-from-russia-and-reappear-in-tajikistan/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁸⁹ For a synopsis of publicly available information about individual cases, see Roof-Top Info, *What is happening in Tajikistan?*, 7 March 2024: <https://wechange.de/project/roof-top-info/file/background-information-on-the-situation-in-kh/download/Background-information-on-the-situation-in-Khorugh.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). One Pamiri human rights defender in exile keeping track of the situation in GBAO reported that he had counted at least 30 cases of deportations and abductions of Pamiris from the Russian Federation in 2022 and 2023 by the moment in 2023 when he lost track: Interview identifier #234, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 9 July 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁹⁰ Interview identifier #221, with a Pamiri man who spent several months in Moscow in 2022, conducted on 14 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity. Jonibek Chorshanbiev and Muslim Nazirov were among the elders of the diaspora community from Khorugh in Russia. Both of them were detained by Russian law enforcement officers and deported to Tajikistan in June 2022, as reported by the online news portal Pamir Inside and the exiled journalist Anora Sarkorova on their respective Telegram channels: <https://t.me/pamirinside/1045> and <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/1373> Catherine Putz, “Pair of Pamiri Activists Disappear From Russia and Reappear in Tajikistan”, The Diplomat, 3 August 2022: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/pair-of-pamiri-activists-disappear-from-russia-and-reappear-in-tajikistan/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

The independent media outlet Mediazona, after collating all the wanted notices from the database of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, has published a database of those who were wanted on criminal charges in the Russian Federation as of 1 February 2024.²⁹¹ Our research team has identified at least four individuals from GBAO who had been involved in the protests in Khorugh in 2021 or 2022, were wanted by the MIA of Tajikistan,²⁹² and were also included in the wanted databased of the MIA of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, Tajikistani security forces informally contacted and threatened Pamiris in Russia with detention and abduction. They not only targeted individuals who had exposed themselves with political activities, but also threatened with detention and abduction male youth who had volunteered in the framework of community activities of the Pamiri diaspora in the Russian Federation. Such threats were made either directly by phone, SMS, via social media messages, or indirectly via relatives, friends and neighbours in Tajikistan. They typically included the message that the security agency was after the respective target person, the offer of mild punishment in case of voluntary return to Tajikistan, and the threat of forcible return from Russia in case of non-compliance.²⁹³

For example, in early 2022, one Pamiri man who was living in Moscow at that time participated in one of the video statements of the Pamiri diaspora in defence of human rights and afterwards received several threatening phone calls:

“The persons who called were male and spoke either Tajik or Russian, one of them spoke Russian without any accent. [...] They did not introduce themselves. [...] The first phone call came from a Russian number, I even remember that it was a [..., specific operator] number. I later asked a friend to call that number, but it was already out of service by then. [...] The first time, the person calling suggested to me to show up at the Embassy of Tajikistan voluntarily. At that time, I did not pay much attention yet. [...] The next time, the person calling used a Tajik proverb as a threat, saying that I might be able to run away temporarily, but they would eventually hold me accountable anyway. I still did not care much. [...] When they called the third or fourth time, I was at home. The person calling told me the address where I was living. [This time] I got nervous and left that place the same day [...] After relocation to [another place], I threw away my SIM card and bought a new one. [...] Within [a few] hours, I got another phone call. [...] I threw away both the SIM card and the phone, and then left for [..., still another place].”²⁹⁴

Another person who had been active in supporting and protecting Oraz Vazirbekov during the first months of 2022 received information that security officers were searching for him:

“Oraz [Vazirbekov] got a call [...] and afterwards told us that there was danger for all [of us]. We understood that there could be problems. [...] They came to my [previous] workplace and asked whether I was working there. A former colleague told me that they had asked. Two men. [...] From the outward appearance, as she described them, I understood that they were employees of the [security] agencies. They spoke Russian. [...] There were phone calls. I answered once. They dictated my first name and surname. I replied that it was not me. Then I changed my phone number. [...] They were at [my relative's] place [where I had previously lived]. [...] They were first speaking Russian but then switched to Tajik. They only said that they were looking for me and that they had been told I was living there. I was not registered there, I do not know how they had found out.”²⁹⁵

One Pamiri man who had been part of the Pomerebutsen network described the patterns of persecution:

“They persecuted those individuals whom we were listening to. [...] If the people listened to him [a certain person], he disturbed them [the security forces] and they started to hunt him. Oraz [Vazirbekov] made us understand that they were following us because we were close to him.”²⁹⁶

The precedents of forcible returns, extradition and abductions from Russia, set by the Tajikistani security forces,²⁹⁷ in combination with individual threats, led to anxiety and panic among Pamiris in the Russian Federation, triggering their further outmigration to third countries.²⁹⁸

²⁹¹ Mediazona, “Wanted in Russia. Mediazona scraped and analyzed the entire Ministry of Internal Affairs’ wanted database—and developed a user-friendly search tool”, 13 February 2024: <https://en.zona.media/article/2024/02/13/wanted> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁹² A video of the wanted list which was publicly displayed at the MIA headquarters in GBAO in 2022/23 has been shared with the research team.

²⁹³ Exiled journalist Anora Sarkorova made these threats public: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/164>, and documented one typical threat message: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/165>, on her Telegram channel (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

²⁹⁴ Interview identifier #220, with one Pamiri man who was living in Moscow in early 2022, conducted on 9 February 2024 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

²⁹⁵ Interview identifier #232, with one Pamiri man who was living in Moscow in early 2022, conducted on 29 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁹⁶ Interview identifier #229, with a Pamiri person who had been part of the Pomerebutsen network, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

²⁹⁷ Catherine Putz, “Pair of Pamiri Activists Disappear From Russia and Reappear in Tajikistan”, *The Diplomat*, 3 August 2022: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/pair-of-pamiri-activists-disappear-from-russia-and-reappear-in-tajikistan/> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

²⁹⁸ Radio Ozodi, “Новый исход: сотни выходцев из ГБАО бегут в страны Европы”, 19 August 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31995404.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

4.9 PRESSURE ON RELATIVES OF EXILED PAMIRIS

Additionally, the security forces routinely put pressure on relatives and acquaintances in Tajikistan to coerce exiled Pamiris to return to Tajikistan. Such pressure on relatives included threatening via social media messages,²⁹⁹ visits at home,³⁰⁰ summons for interrogation³⁰¹ or taking into custody.³⁰² One Pamiri man targeted by the security forces but living abroad recalls the years 2022 and 2023:

“They [security officers] summoned my [..., specific relative] for interrogation, talked to him aggressively, cursed him, tried to provoke him. [...] They went to [..., another relative’s] house and talked about me, saying that I’m such a bad person. My [..., relative] got high blood pressure and required medical treatment. [...] Each time, they tried to coerce [..., my relatives] to get in touch with me and to tell me to return and to surrender [to the security forces]. [...] I avoid direct contact with [..., relatives in Tajikistan]. God forbid, if they [the security forces] found out that I am in direct contact with [..., a specific person], they would find ways to force me to get in touch and to return [to Tajikistan].”³⁰³

A relative of one exiled person who had fled Tajikistan in summer 2022 recalls events from the time when the relative was still in the country (but subsequently also left):

“They [security officers] put pressure on me when [..., my relative] had left. [...] They often called me and asked me ‘Where is [..., the relative]?’ I said: ‘I do not know.’ They said: ‘If [your relative] calls you, tell him to show up.’ [...] I was scared of answering the phone. [What if] [..., the relative] called? They intercept everything. [...] They called me from the SCNS and summoned me. I took [..., another relative with me]. They asked about [..., my relative], insulted me. I was crying and told them that I did not know myself where [..., the relative] was. They told me: ‘If he calls, let us know immediately.’ They came to [..., my workplace], asked me whether I was related to [..., my relative]. They asked me whether I had time to talk. I said that I was busy. He told me: ‘Come here, look into my eyes, you are lying that [..., your relative] does not call.’ [...] I expected myself that they would do something. [...] Somebody called me [and told me about an emergency at my workplace]. I called a taxi and rushed to [..., my workplace]. SCNS officers were already there and immediately asked me: ‘Where is [..., the relative]?’”³⁰⁴

In some cases, pressure on relatives abroad was also aimed at silencing activists and preventing them from diaspora activism. One Pamiri who had taken part in a rally in a European capital in 2023 recalls:

“There were [a few months of] silence after the rally. [Then] they summoned [..., my relative] a few times. [They asked my relative about me:] ‘Why did he [play a certain role?] Why does he go to rallies, why does he continue to meddle into politics?’ They told him that I and [..., certain other relatives] would get problems if I did not return.”³⁰⁵

According to various interlocutors, their relatives left Tajikistan as a result of the harassment by security forces.³⁰⁶ Pressure on relatives in Tajikistan in order to coerce dissenters in exile is a common practice of the Tajikistani security forces, as documented by Human Rights Watch in a report on transnational repression.³⁰⁷

²⁹⁹ Interview identifier #229, with a Pamiri person who had fled from the Russian Federation in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁰⁰ Interview identifier #231, with a Pamiri person who had fled from Tajikistan in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁰¹ Interview identifier #231, with a Pamiri person who had fled from Tajikistan in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁰² Interview identifier #228, with a Pamiri person who had fled from Tajikistan in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁰³ Interview identifier #220, with one Pamiri man who was living outside of Tajikistan in 2022 and 2023, conducted on 9 February 2024 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

³⁰⁴ Interview identifier #226, with the relative of a Pamiri person who had fled Tajikistan in summer 2022, conducted on 23 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁰⁵ Interview identifier #229, with a Pamiri person who had fled from the Russian Federation in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁰⁶ Interview identifier #229, with a Pamiri person who had fled from the Russian Federation in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. Interview identifier #331, with a Pamiri person who had fled from Tajikistan in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁰⁷ HRW, *We Will Find You*, 22 February 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/22/we-will-find-you/global-look-how-governments-repress-nationals-abroad> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

5. SOCIOECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION AND CURBING OF ACCESS TO RESOURCES

The aggregate and long-term impact of these and other measures amounts to violations of economic, social and cultural rights in so far as they are resulting in the impoverishment of the Pamiri minority in Tajikistan and the curtailment of its socioeconomic potential.

5.1 JOBS IN THE GOVERNMENT SECTOR USED AS A LEVERAGE, USE OF DISCRIMINATIVE PRACTICES

GBAO has little industry and limited agricultural potential. The tourism sector, which has brought some limited economic support for the area, was significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the recent political instability, as well as travel and other restrictions imposed by the government in the aftermath of the 2021/22 crackdown.

The authoritative discrimination watchdog, Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial (ADC Memorial), wrote in its 2023 submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan's Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan's 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020*:

“GBAO is facing economic difficulties, its road and transportation systems are not developed (the roads are in terrible condition, there were no flights to or from other regions of Tajikistan in the last ten years), and its industrial infrastructure is in dire straits. In general, the Pamiri are more likely to migrate than residents of other regions because of unemployment (in the GBAO, the unemployment rate of workers aged 15 to 75 was 26.8, with a national average of 11.5, Statistical Agency Under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2016 data). Although GBAO comprises half of the territory of Tajikistan and has most of the country's resources, it remains the least developed region. No heavy industry and factories are built in the region for the last 30 years. Many lands with resources are given to Chinese companies who usually bring their own employees and don't recruit the local Pamiris. [...] Many businesspersons complain about the pressure from the government, high taxation, and additional government subsidies to be paid, which ultimately lead to the closure of many small and medium business initiatives.”³⁰⁸

As a result, the state plays a key role in providing employment and income for the residents of GBAO. This also gives the Tajikistani authorities considerable additional leverage over the local population, while the central authorities have also been increasingly replacing locals, Pamiris, in senior positions in the civilian administration. In early 2024, President Emomali Rahmon appointed new acting heads of several districts of GBAO. In three districts where the majority of population are Pamiri Ismaili (Rushan, Roshtkala and Ishkashim districts), the new appointees are men who were born and had spent most of their careers in other regions of the country, as reported

³⁰⁸ ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan's Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan's 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020*, 20 March 2023, p. 4: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/adc-memorial-cerd-109-session-tajikistan-april-2023-eng-final.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

by the independent news portal Asia-Plus.³⁰⁹ This adds to the effect of the government increasingly deploying ethnic Tajik officers in the security agencies who have not been embedded in the social fabric of the local communities.³¹⁰ According to ADC Memorial, “[t]he Pamiri are also underrepresented in governance and key administrative bodies which predominantly include the law enforcement agencies in GBAO, as the leadership and the overwhelming majority of staff at security structures in GBAO are from other regions of Tajikistan.” ADC Memorial also reports direct discrimination whereby “Pamiri people who struggle to speak the plain Tajik language are usually discriminated and are limited in getting jobs in the government bodies.”³¹¹

In the context of the 2021/22 crackdown, many Pamiri state employees in civilian institutions were either dismissed or dropped out of public employment for non-compliance with requests by security forces which were perceived as unjust and immoral. Among them were demands to make public statements and incriminate fellow Pamiris after the November 2021 protests (see above),³¹² or to participate in state-sponsored festivities which were being boycotted by the local population.³¹³ For example, one Pamiri with work experience in a state agency in GBAO explains the consequences of the pressure to make public statements:

“Those who did not agree [to make a public statement], [many of them] have left [the country] or quit their jobs. [...] Most of the young men have left. Other employees have [found different ways to quit their job]. They quit because of the interview [public statement].”³¹⁴

At the same time, in the wake of the 2021/22 crackdown for some Pamiris the situation was further aggravated by the mass prosecution of local residents under unfounded, politically-motivated criminal charges (see above): convictions for crimes against the state and security created criminal records which made them ineligible for jobs in the public sector. Under Article 265(2) of the Labour Code, “[a] person who has committed a serious or especially serious crime and has an outstanding criminal record cannot be hired into the civil service or to a position related to the performance of organizational, administrative and economic functions.”³¹⁵ Reportedly, some Pamiris were also denied jobs in the public sector because they were related to prisoners or people with certain criminal records.³¹⁶

5.2 JOB LOSS AND IMPACT ON LIVELIHOODS FROM CLOSURES OF LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS

The entities affiliated to the global Ismaili community and to the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) had previously played a key role as employers of Pamiri in both GBAO and Dushanbe. For years, AKDN-affiliated entities were negatively portrayed in the government-owned and pro-government Tajikistani media, yet remained open and in operation until 2022. The crackdown on those entities after May 2022 had massive implications for the livelihoods of their employees. Organizations affiliated to AKDN were ousted by

³⁰⁹ Manzuma Firuz, “Кто они – новые главы районов Горно-Бадахшанской автономной области”, Asia-Plus, 17 February 2024:

<https://asiaplusti.info/ru/news/tajikistan/power/20240217/kto-oni-novie-glavi-raionov-gorno-badakhshanskoi-avtonomnoi-oblasti> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³¹⁰ ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020*, 20 March 2023, p. 3: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/adc-memorial-cerd-109-session-tajikistan-april-2023-eng-final.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4.

³¹² This was also reported by the analytical platform CABAR.asia, “A Growing Split in Society in GBAO Amid Authorities’ Propaganda Campaign”, 3 February 2022: <https://cabar.asia/en/?p=51099> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³¹³ For example, after the crackdown in May 2022, the authorities organized various concerts in Khorugh to demonstrate the return to normal life. As many residents boycotted such state-sponsored events, the authorities coerced state employees and students, over whom they had leverage, to participate: Interview identifier #301, with a person who visited GBAO in summer 2022 and was informed about such concerts, conducted on 18 June 2023 via video call. The Telegram channel of the news portal Pamir Inside which is known for its reliable sources in GBAO reported about coerced participation of state employees in various state-sponsored cultural events in summer 2022: <https://t.me/pamirinside/1133> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³¹⁴ Interview identifier #219, with one Pamiri with work experience in a state institution, conducted on 3 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

³¹⁵ Labour Code of the Republic of Tajikistan, available at https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=31960488 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³¹⁶ Interview identifier #402, with one Pamiri Ismaili who had applied for a job in a state agency in Khorugh in 2021, conducted on 13 February 2023 via video call on condition of anonymity. That person’s father had been convicted and imprisoned in the past, but had already passed away more than a decade before. Nevertheless, the director of the state agency rejected the application and openly told the applicant that the reason was his father’s criminal record. One interlocutor whose relative had been convicted for an alleged offence against the constitutional order and the security of the state assumed not to have any chance to find work in the public sector because of the relative’s politically motivated conviction: Interview identifier #227, with the relative of a Pamiri Ismaili who had been convicted for an alleged offence against the constitutional order and the security of the state, conducted on 24 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

means of the confiscation of their premises in Khorugh or the real estate used by them,³¹⁷ or their outright closure,³¹⁸ which resulted in the loss of an estimated 300 relatively well-paid jobs.³¹⁹

Since the end of the civil war, NGOs working with grants from international donors have played a major role in the development of the economy of GBAO. However, after the May 2022 crackdown, the authorities effectively restricted the space of NGOs with unjustified and excessive audits and reviews.³²⁰ By spring 2023, most of them had been closed, gone into self-liquidation or suspended their activities under pressure from the SCNS.³²¹

More widely the imprisonment, and forced migration of significant parts of the male population (see below) has seriously reduced the available workforce and in so doing the supporting to families' incomes.

5.3 DESTRUCTION, AND CONFISCATION AND UNLAWFUL SEIZURE OF MATERIAL RESOURCES

Security forces used the 2021/22 crackdown in GBAO to unlawfully extract material resources and redistribute wealth at the expense of Pamiris.

In late-May 2022, a fire destroyed a market hall and 14 shops in the main bazaar in Khorugh.³²² The timing of this event, coinciding with the authorities' crackdown on protests in GBAO and suppression of independent media reporting from the region, gave rise to speculations about the possible suspicious causes of the fire.³²³ This incident has not been effectively investigated.

Harassment of the Pamiri owners of small businesses by the authorities and abusive practices by the security forces after the crackdown in May 2022 have decreased the profitability of businesses, e.g. through arbitrary and excessive inspections by the tax authorities, or extortion by security officers.³²⁴ One former shop owner explained the latter:

"They [security officers] buy for whichever price they like. For example, they take [... , a certain product] which costs US\$ 300 and give you US\$ 50. [...] It is better to sell it [for such a price] and just to take the money. If you do not give [... , the product], they will create problems, thousands of problems. You are glad if he [the security officer] pays half the price and leaves [the shop]. [...] But [... this eventually] leads to bankruptcy."³²⁵

³¹⁷ The local news portal Pamir Inside reported in October 2022 that the premises used by the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP), the Aga Khan Health Service (AKHS) and two kindergartens under the Aga Khan Education Service (AKES) in Khorugh had been confiscated: Pamir Inside, "Власти Таджикистана продолжают оказывать давление на Сеть Ага Хана по развитию в Таджикистане", 17 October 2022: <https://pamirinside.org/власти-таджикистана-продолжают-оказывать-давление-на-сеть-ага-хана-по-развитию-в-таджикистане/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). In June 2023, Radio Ozodi reported that the hotel Serena Inn in Khorugh, which had belonged to the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (AKFED), had been confiscated and that the confiscation of the Aga Khan Medical Centre in Khorugh was in process: Radio Ozodi, "Власти Таджикистана национализируют объекты Фонда Ага Хана в Хоруге – источники", 16 June 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32461960.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). In August 2023, the independent news organization Eurasianet reported that the government had started procedures to seize the land on which the Khorugh campus of the University of Central Asia (UCA) had been built: Eurasianet, "Tajikistan: University of Central Asia latest target in Aga Khan sweep", 10 August 2023: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-university-of-central-asia-latest-target-in-aga-khan-sweep> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³¹⁸ The Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB) was closed in February 2022 after its work had already been suspended in September 2022: Felix Corley, "Tajikistan: Regime bans Ismaili home prayers, lessons for children", Forum 18, 21 February 2023: https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2811 (last accessed on 23 August 2024). The highly renowned Aga Khan Lycee in Khorugh, which had been a symbol of the educational ambitions of residents of GBAO and a key educational institution in the region, was closed by the authorities on 30 June 2023 without explanation: Mirzonabi Holikzod, Hursand Hurrarov, "В Хоруге закрыт лицей Ага Хана. Власти решили преобразовать его в обычную школу", 4 July 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32488890.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³¹⁹ Eurasianet, "Tajikistan steps up nationalization campaign against Aga Khan operation", 5 July 2023: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-steps-up-nationalization-campaign-against-aga-khan-operation> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). Family incomes were also affected by the enforced salary cuts in certain entities: The local news portal Pamir Inside reported in January 2023 that the energy provider Pamir Energy and the Aga Khan Medical Center had been coerced after state audits to cut the salaries of their employees: Pamir Inside, "Зарплаты сотрудников энергетической компании 'Pamir Energy' и 'Медицинского центра Ага Хана' в Хоруге урезаны после аудиторской проверки из Душанбе", 13 January 2023: <https://pamirinside.org/зарплаты-сотрудников-энергетической> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³²⁰ As noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders in the report on the country visit to Tajikistan in December 2022, the SCNS or the Ministry of Justice can instruct the tax authority to implement investigations of NGOs "with the unstated aim of finding irregularities that may provide sufficient grounds for forcing the closure of the organization": Human Rights Council, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Visit to Tajikistan, 16 January 2024, Par. 23: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036139?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

³²¹ The self-liquidation was reported by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief after a visit to Tajikistan in April 2023: Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Par. 77: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf>. The pressure on NGOs working on GBAO events was also noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders after her visit to Tajikistan in December 2022: OHCHR, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Preliminary observations and recommendations Dushanbe, 9 December 2022, pp. 3-4: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/defenders/2022-12-08/EoM-Visit-Tajikistan-9Dec2022-EN.docx>. In August 2023, Radio Ozodi reported the outright closing of five NGOs: Sarvinov Ruhullo, "Минон: в ГБАО прекращена деятельность пяти общественных организаций", 8 August 2023: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32538999.html>. In their reply to a communication by UN HRC special procedures of 4 October 2022 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27560>), the Tajikistani authorities confirmed in May 2024 that 257 organizations in GBAO had closed since 2022, out of which 109 had been closed by court decision and 148 had gone into self-liquidation: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gld=38401> (all sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³²² Radio Ozodi, "Ущерб от пожара в Хоруге оценен в 1 млн сомони", 29 May 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31873893.html> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³²³ Bomdod, "Фото с места ЧП", 29 May 2022: <https://bomdodrus.com/2022/05/29/foto-s-mesta-chp-pozhar-v-tc-nasriddin-i-vzryv-mosta-v-horoge/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³²⁴ Interview identifier #210, with a Pamiri man who was related to a shop owner in Khorugh, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³²⁵ Interview identifier #226, with a former Pamiri shop owner living in Khorugh until 2023, conducted on 23 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. This was confirmed by another interlocutor who had talked to a shop owner in Khorugh in late 2023 and learnt that SCNS officers had come to the

Since May 2022, the real estate and businesses of Pamiri individuals have been systematically seized after they had been killed or detained, sometimes apparently without any legal basis.³²⁶ This happened to informal community leaders and several key business leaders, who were detained and charged for providing material support to protesters.³²⁷ Vehicles and mobile phones of detainees and their relatives were seized on a mass scale, in many cases immediately after they had been detained and before any court hearing.³²⁸

Another area that has been impacted has been community-based savings groups which had been relatively successful and popular within Pamiri communities. The mechanism had allowed small groups of families to accumulate capital collectively based on mutual trust to invest in businesses or the households.³²⁹ In May 2023, the authorities did not only penalize participation in these community-based saving groups. In different places of GBAO, individuals who had coordinated such groups were fined, and at least in one case the cash box with the collective savings was allegedly seized. Subsequently, for fear of similar reprisals, other community-based saving groups decided to dissolve, which curbed access to social and financial capital.³³⁰

5.4 WIDESPREAD EXTORTION BY LAW ENFORCEMENT AND PENITENTIARY PERSONNEL

As income sources for the local population dwindled, and as the detention and imprisonment of numerous individuals meant additional financial pressure on their families, money and in-kind transfers from Pamiris to ethnic Tajik security officers, who are largely in control of the law enforcement and penitentiary sectors, have often effectively amounted to extortion.

Against the background of the greatly increased presence of security forces deployed by the central government in GBAO and the impunity with which they are acting, the local people in the region have faced disproportionate risks not only of detention, but also of having to pay fines and bribes.³³¹ One person in GBAO reportedly was forced to pay approximately US\$ 2,000 in May 2023 through non-official channels when detained for driving a car without a driving license, remarkably not by the traffic police, but by the SCNS.³³² Another person working for a service provider in GBAO was arrested in 2022 after committing an error in verifying the identity of a client and had to pay a bribe of approximately US\$ 2,000 to get released.³³³ Still another person in GBAO reportedly was forced to pay a bribe of approximately US\$ 450, after a law enforcement officer accused this person of illegal wood cutting (Art. 234 of the Criminal Code) on account of having pruned fewer than a dozen of trees inside the family's orchard, even though the accusation was unfounded.³³⁴ Bribes were reportedly regularly paid for getting individuals released from custody, avoiding indictment or reducing their potential sentences. One person detained by the authorities a few years before 2022, reported that he had to pay a bribe of US\$ 3,500 in order to be granted his release.³³⁵ Another person had to pay two bribes of approximately US\$ 2,000 each to SCNS and MIA officers in 2022 to

shop, used swearwords, taken whatever they needed without paying, sometimes bringing the goods back after using them: Interview identifier #206, with a Pamiri man, conducted on 29 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³²⁶ The Criminal Code allows for the confiscation of the property as part of the sentence for various offences against the public safety (e.g. Article 187 Criminal Code) and against the constitutional order and the security of the state (e.g. Article 307 Criminal Code) on the basis of which most Pamiris were convicted in 2022. In many cases it is impossible in practice to distinguish between confiscation as part of the sentence and illegal seizure as the verdicts (which may have included the confiscation of property) were not made public.

³²⁷ In July 2022, the Telegram channel Pamirinside, which published reports based on credible local sources, reported that the boarding houses of Tolib Ayombekov and Khursand Mazorov, the house and shop of Salam Imomnazarov, and the meat factory premises of Nasriddin Sabzaliev were confiscated after their arrest: <https://t.me/pamirinside/1053> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). One interlocutor reported that a neighbour had been detained and convicted because he had provided protesters with financial resources, and that his business assets had been confiscated or seized: Interview identifier #228, with a Pamiri person who had fled from Tajikistan in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity. One interlocutor reported that a shop registered on him had been confiscated or seized by the authorities in summer 2022, soon after the detention of his relative: Interview identifier #230, with a Pamiri man whose relative was detained in summer 2022, conducted on 29 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³²⁸ Anora Sarkorova's Telegram channel, 10 February 2023: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/877>. The Criminal Code allows for the confiscation of the property as part of the sentence for various charges. The state news agency Khovar reported in mid-June 2022 that 39 vehicles had been seized: Khovar, "Межведомственный штаб сообщает: Полностью прекращена деятельность организованных террористических групп на территории ГБАО", 17 June 2022: <https://khovar.tj/rus/2022/06/mezhvedomstvennyj-shtab-soobshhaet-polnostyu-prekrashhena-deyatelnost-organizovannyh-terroristicheskikh-grupp-na-territorii-gbao/> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024). This statement was published at the time before the trials of those arrested in May and June 2022 were held, i.e. before they were sentenced. The actual number is probably higher, as one source reported that vehicles were not only seized, but also requested as a bribe: Interview identifier #211, with a Pamiri man, conducted on 15 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

³²⁹ Aga Khan Foundation, "From access to empowerment: community-based savings groups in rural Tajikistan", 11 April 2023: <https://the.akdn/en/resources-media/whats-new/spotlights/from-access-to-empowerment-communitybased-savings-groups-in-rural-tajikistan> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³³⁰ Interview identifier #409, with a person with work experience in an organization affiliated with AKDN, conducted on 25 June 2023 via video call on condition of anonymity. The seizure of cash boxes was also confirmed by an interlocutor who had been informed about such an incident by a member of the community-based savings group who was present at a meeting of the group when it was raided by security officers and the cash box with the collective savings was taken by them: Interview identifier #226, with a Pamiri living in Khorugh until 2023, conducted on 23 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³³¹ The presence of security forces in GBAO was increased from September 2018 onward, with peaks in autumn 2018 after President Rahmon's speech in Khorugh, in January/February 2022 and in May/June 2022.

³³² Interview identifier #408, with a relative of the person who had to make the payment, conducted on 16 May 2023 via voice call on condition of anonymity. Under Art. 336 of the Law on Administrative Offences, the penalty for driving of a car without a driving license is 250 tax base units: <https://ncz.tj/content/кодекс-республики-таджикистан-об-административных-правонарушениях> (last accessed on 18 June 2024). One tax base unit corresponded to 68 Tajik Somoni at the time (around US\$ 6.80): Asia-Plus, "В Таджикистане размер показателя для расчетов в 2023 году повысится", 14 December 2022: <https://asiaplus.tj/info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20221214/v-tadzhikistane-razmer-pokazatelya-dlya-raschetov-v-2023-godu-povisitsya-na-625> (last accessed on 18 June 2024).

³³³ Interview identifier #415, with a relative of the person who was arrested and had to pay the bribe, conducted on 25 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

³³⁴ Interview identifier #411, with a relative of the person who was fined, conducted in January 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity. The fine was based on Article 234 of the Criminal Code (Illegal wood cutting) punishable by a fine of 500 to 700 tax base units (been US\$ 3,400 to 4,760) if "committed to a significant extent".

³³⁵ Interview identifier #207, with a person who was kept in MIA custody before 2022, conducted on 30 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

avoid prosecution under fabricated charges.³³⁶ Pamiris also had to pay for safe passage out of Tajikistan, so called “corridors” for refugees through the border and customs control at airports or land border crossings, which were allegedly facilitated by corrupt officers of security agencies. One person who fled from GBAO after May 2022 reported that they paid US\$ 7,000 for his “corridor”.³³⁷

The economic demands on families in the Pamiri communities is also being impacted by the fact that those with family members in prison often have to provide subsistence to them and in many cases pay bribes. One Pamiri man arrested in GBAO in June 2022 was initially held in the pretrial detention centre in Khorugh. A female relative brought food to him every day, which was a common practice given the extremely poor quality of the food provided by the detention centre. The prison guards, who were mainly ethnic Tajiks, demanded additional bribes for passing it to him. Although she was always accompanied by male relatives when delivering food, prison guards were very rude and sometimes even used offensive and obscene language against her. Therefore, a male relative of the detainee took over the task of delivering food to him. The daily package of groceries, including the bribes and cigarettes for the prison guards, cost around 50-60 Tajik Somoni (approximately US\$ 5), a very substantive sum in the context of the local economy and people’s living costs, considering that the average salary in GBAO, according to official statistics, was around 1,719.77 Tajik Somoni (approximately US\$ 170).³³⁸ In addition, clothing, bedding, as well as hygiene articles had to be provided.³³⁹

One interlocutor described the impact which the detention of a relative had on the whole family and its livelihood. In this case, groceries and other products could only be delivered during official visits once per month:

“The detention [of my relative] has changed our life very much, in a negative sense. [My detained relative] had been supporting my family and also [my sibling’s] family. Suddenly this [support] was gone. My [..., sibling] went to Dushanbe to work there and to support [..., our detained relative]. I cannot send money [to support our detained relative] every month, only once in two or three months. We are just surviving. [...] They definitively do not feed [the prisoners] properly there [in prison]. Everybody [has to survive] on their own. All the relatives collect [money] a little bit. [...] Around 1,500 or 2,000 Tajik Somoni [US\$ 150 to 200] are required every month, that [is the amount] I have heard from my relatives. It includes food, clothes, phone expenses, and so on. [...] They do provide [food] there, but it is absolutely impossible to eat it.”³⁴⁰

Another interlocutor explained the consequences of a relative’s detention in summer 2022:

“My [..., relative] has left Khorugh and moved to Dushanbe to provide to my [..., imprisoned relative] whatever he needs. They rent an apartment in Dushanbe, so also [have] the running costs. [...] [From the money I get] I keep only US\$ 100 for myself and send the rest [to my relative in Dushanbe]. I bought a phone on credit for US\$ 1,5000 and sold it for US\$ 1,000 in order to send the money. There are people who were close to us and support [financially]. [..., another relative] lives in Russia with the spouse, they also help, but they have children as well. [Sustaining] my [..., imprisoned relative] costs maximum US\$ 700, minimum US\$ 500 [per month], that includes food (the food needs to be good), medical expenses, phone expenses and bribes. It depends on the mood of the guards. [...] [As a prisoner], you need to pay bribes so that you are not sent to the isolation cell. When a guard needs money, [he threatens] to send you to the isolation cell [alleging] that you raised your hand [but then says:] ‘Money is also fine.’ [...] Pamiris in every corner of the world collect money to support a little bit.”³⁴¹

According to one interlocutor whose relative is serving a life sentence, the person who visits the prisoner once in six months has to submit products for the whole period of six months, which requires around US\$ 2,000.³⁴²

³³⁶ Interview identifier #415, with a Pamiri person from GBAO who was summoned for interrogation by SCNS and shortly afterwards by MIA in 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

³³⁷ Interview identifier #211, with a Pamiri man who fled from GBAO after May 2022, conducted on 15 July 2023 by a voice call on condition of anonymity.

³³⁸ <https://mehnat.tj/ru/activity/labor>.

³³⁹ Interview identifier #401, with the relative of a Pamiri who had been detained in summer 2022, conducted on 21 October 2022 via video call on condition of anonymity.

³⁴⁰ Interview identifier #227, with the relative of a Pamiri who had been detained in summer 2022, conducted on 24 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁴¹ Interview identifier #230, with a Pamiri man whose relative was detained in summer 2022, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁴² Interview identifier #230, with a Pamiri man whose relative was detained in summer 2022 and is serving a life sentence, conducted on 25 February 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

6. SUPPRESSION OF EXPRESSION OF ETHNORELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) stipulates that ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language (Article. 27).

The assertive expression of ethnoreligious identity of Pamiris was increasingly sanctioned after the civil war. Accompanied by assimilatory efforts to enforce the adoption of a state-sponsored and uniformly Tajik identity in public performances, media and schools, measures to suppress Pamiri identity were exacerbated in the aftermath of the 2021/22 crackdown.

6.1 SUPPRESSION OF THE USE OF PAMIRI LANGUAGES

The Pamiri languages, which belong to the Eastern Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family, are a group of several closely related and mutually intelligible languages, among them Shughni, Rushani, Wakhi, Ishkashimi, and Yazghulami. The Law on State Language³⁴³ adopted in 2009 defines Tajik as the state language (Article 3(1)) and mandates its use in all spheres of political, social, economic, scientific and cultural life (Article 3(5)) but explicitly does not regulate the use of languages in private communication (Article 2). It not only grants the right to “all nations and peoples who live on the territory of the Republic of Tajikistan [...] to freely use their mother tongue, with the exception of those cases which are defined by this Law” (Article 4(1)), but also obliges the state to “create conditions for the free use, protection and development of Badakhshani (Pamiri) languages and the Yaghnoibi language” (Article 4(2)).³⁴⁴

In practice, however, the authorities have increasingly suppressed the use of Pamiri languages. Whereas programmes on local state television and articles in local newspapers in Pamiri languages had been permitted to some extent in the 1990s, they were later removed from the official media space. An anonymous author from GBAO reported in December 2021 that speaking Pamiri languages on local TV (“TV Badakhshan”) no longer featured, including songs in local languages.³⁴⁵ An attempt to establish a regular radio

³⁴³ The Law of the Republic Tajikistan on the State Language of the Republic of Tajikistan: <https://www.kumitaizabon.tj/ru/content/zakon-respubliki-tadzhikistan-o-gosudarstvennom-vazvke-respubliki-tadzhikistan> (last accessed on 18 June 2024). Translation from the Russian original by the authors.

³⁴⁴ For a review of the Law, see Human Rights Council, Visit to Tajikistan: report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, 13 February 2024, para. 26: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

³⁴⁵ Pamir Inside, “О ситуации в ГБАО. Какое морально-психологическое давление испытывает население региона”, 29 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/о-ситуации-в-гбао-какое-морально-психо/> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

broadcast in Pamiri languages in the mid-2010s was stifled.³⁴⁶ Pamiri languages were not taught or used for teaching in schools.³⁴⁷ Their use for oral communication was practically banned in state institutions.³⁴⁸

During and after the 2021/22 crackdown, the Tajikistani authorities, with the help of security forces, intensified their efforts to discourage communication in Pamiri languages, including in kindergartens³⁴⁹ and in schools, even outside of the classrooms.³⁵⁰ The Law on Education enforces the use of the state language – Tajik – as “the principal language” in all educational institutions, and mandates all education personnel “to follow the norms of the state language” (Art. 7(1); Art. 51(1)).³⁵¹ The research team was made aware of an instance when, in January 2023, a schoolteacher in GBAO was allegedly fined and dismissed when an officer of a security agency during a routine inspection overheard her talking to her students in Shughni outside of the classroom.³⁵²

According to journalist Anora Sarkorova, the security forces also penalized the use of Pamiri languages in public spaces. Even if there was no formal prohibition, they threatened residents with prosecution under fabricated charges if they communicated in their native languages.³⁵³ Throughout the last months of 2023, the newspaper of the Khorugh city administration (“Nigini Khorugh”) published several reports about municipality workers inspecting shops, restaurants and service providers in Khorugh, notifying them in case they perceived names or texts on signboards as not compatible with the provisions of the Law on State Language and requesting changes, effectively attempting to eradicate Pamiri names from the cityscape of Khorugh.³⁵⁴

While the official report submitted by Tajikistan to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2020 included numerous references to the promotion of educational institutions, textbooks and media in the Russian, Uzbek, English, Persian, Arabic and Kyrgyz languages, it was completely silent about Pamiri languages and the Yagnobi language.³⁵⁵ This reflected the official denial of the existence of a distinct Pamiri minority, in stark contrast with the state’s legal obligation to create conditions for the free use, protection and development specifically of the Pamiri languages and the Yagnobi language (Law on State Language, Article 4(2)).

The suppression of the use of Pamiri languages forms part of a broader trend described by the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues after his country visit to Tajikistan in October 2023:

“While there are provisions for the use of minority languages in education, recent years have seen a growing Tajik nationalism emphasizing the acquisition of the Tajik language and the integration of minorities, leading to an assimilation that is not entirely voluntary. The pressure is

³⁴⁶ This was reported by ADC Memorial in 2017: ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s Ninth to Eleventh Periodic Reports for 2012–2015*, p. 10: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/TajCERDeng3.pdf>, and in 2023: ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020*, 20 March 2023, pp. 3-4: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/adcmemorial-cerd-109-session-tajikistan-april-2023-eng-final.pdf>. See also Minority Rights Group, “Pamiris in Tajikistan”, Updated March 2023: <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/pamiris/> and <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-pamir-gun-amnesty-masks-underlying-unease> (all sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁴⁷ The exclusion of Pamiri languages from the educational sphere was reported by ADC Memorial in 2017: ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s Ninth to Eleventh Periodic Reports for 2012–2015*, p. 9: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/TajCERDeng3.pdf>. This contrasted with 137 (out of a total of 3,884) educational institutions which used Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz or English as language of instruction, according to an official report submitted by Tajikistan to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2020, par. 49: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2F2012-13&Lang=en (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁴⁸ This was reported by journalist Anora Sarkorova on her Telegram channel on 5 February 2023: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/859> (last accessed on 23 August 2024) and numerous sources who must remain anonymous.

³⁴⁹ An anonymous author from GBAO reported in December 2021 that security officers visited kindergartens and demanded that the children should only communicate in Tajik language: Pamir Inside, “О ситуации в ГBAO. Какое морально-психологическое давление испытывает население региона”, 29 December 2021: <https://pamirinside.org/о-ситуации-в-гбао-какое-морально-психологическое-давление-испытывает-население-региона/>.

³⁵⁰ ADC Memorial in 2023 reported about security officers visiting schools and kindergartens and demanding that teachers and students only use Tajik language: ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan’s Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan’s 12-13th Periodic Reports for 2017–2020*, 20 March 2023, p. 3: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/adcmemorial-cerd-109-session-tajikistan-april-2023-eng-final.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁵¹ The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Education, available at <https://tajmedun.tj/Uploads/documents/education/Закон%20РТ%2006%20Образовании.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁵² Interview identifier #404, with the relative of the schoolteacher, conducted on 2 March 2023 via video call on condition of anonymity.

³⁵³ This was reported by Anora Sarkorova in February 2023: <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/859> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). She provided the specific example of one resident of Khorugh who had been beaten and threatened with prosecution by security officers for speaking Shughni language in a restaurant, according to a second-hand source: Interview with Anora Sarkorova, conducted on 15 and 18 May 2023 via video call.

³⁵⁴ Facebook posts by Рӯзномаи Нигини Хоруғ of 21 September 2023:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid03QLNKLGMuvvc6bxVW1TpyDTDAU7GA5ox4Du2STzTVCsjpnoyH5B4xpkwZV9MyNRPI&id=61551207534554, of 24 October 2023:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0nZkwnKhEmYmWtc9igTiDaGAKBSSDDWA63Z4UudMAECANRC8YgAKfss6dnJ1hPxrzal&id=61551207534554, of 21 November 2023:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0233oWKF7fnXPwLrUAUEFMtqkPju4bmi7uaTNDqcYqSeNekqs8PjoVcFdyQ6MaW6NBi&id=61551207534554, and of 20 December 2023:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02P2xaqbWflmJBF1sEY74Eq7Q1Q5ozWaoNdbNbf3rtpMdtuCRYtjt6a82qciP2api5l&id=61551207534554 (all sources last accessed on 23 August 2024). The pictures of signboards perceived as problematic published in the articles show that the municipality workers were targeting signboards with texts in English, Russian and Pamiri languages.

³⁵⁵ UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Combined twelfth and thirteenth periodic reports submitted by Tajikistan under article 9 of the Convention*, 10 February 2020, par. 60: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2F2012-13&Lang=en (last accessed on 22 August 2024).

quite significant, as minority languages are essentially excluded from being used for access to public services, with only Tajik provided for and, in practice, some use of Russian.”³⁵⁶

6.2 SUPPRESSION OF THE EXPRESSION OF PAMIRI IDENTITY AND CULTURE

The Law on Regulating Traditions, Celebrations, and Rituals was amended in 2017 (Article 14(2)): “Physical and legal persons are obliged to protect the elements of the national culture, in particular of the state language and the national dress.”³⁵⁷ The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief after her visit in Tajikistan in April 2023 expressed concerns that “this results in restrictions on the right of minorities to enjoy their own culture and practice, in violation of article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”³⁵⁸

Against the background of the denial of the existence of a distinct Pamiri minority, the expression of Pamiri identity and culture in public, which had already been previously discouraged, was openly suppressed during and after the 2021/22 crackdown.

Pamiri artists were banned from displaying any signs of Pamiri identity in their creative performances. One source reported that they were instructed not to speak Pamiri languages at wedding ceremonies, while musicians performing at weddings were instructed not to sing songs in Pamiri languages.³⁵⁹ During the 2023 celebration of Nowruz, female Pamiri students and state officials in Khorugh were instructed to dress in traditional Tajik costumes instead of their own traditional Pamiri attire, and to perform dances and sing songs in Tajik, without traditional Pamiri music or songs in Pamiri languages.³⁶⁰

Traditional Pamiri Ismaili festivities were banned altogether. Pamiri Ismailis in GBAO commemorate the first visit of the Aga Khan to GBAO (25 May 1995) with *Ruzi Nur*, the beginning of the imamate of the Aga Khan (11 July 1957) with the *Imamat Day* (also known as *Khushali*), as well as the birthday of the Aga Khan (13 December) with *Salgirah*. Until 2021, festivities on these anniversaries included popular folk festivals with dances, parades, and wrestling competitions.³⁶¹ They were not only held in Bar Khorugh and Turchid (UPD) neighbourhoods of Khorugh under the protection of informal community leaders, but also in many villages throughout GBAO.

After the 2021/22 crackdown, the authorities effectively prevented the holding of such public festivities. Apart from that, in at least one instance, they also prosecuted an individual who had organized such festivities or played active roles in them.³⁶²

6.3 SUPPRESSION OF THE PRACTICE OF FAITH

In the report following her visit to Tajikistan in April 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief noted:

“One cannot say that freedom of religion or belief is totally absent in Tajikistan. There is a spectrum of treatment being experienced by both Muslims and non-Muslims. Some have sufficient scope for it to cater for most of their claims, others find an adequate fit within its directed parameters. Regardless, the spectrum of the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief falls alarmingly short of the scope of guarantees in

³⁵⁶ Human Rights Council, Visit to Tajikistan: report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, 13 February 2024, para. 39:

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 22 August 2024). For an assessment of the situation of linguistic minorities, see paras. 52-60.

³⁵⁷ The Law the Republic of Tajikistan on Regulating Traditions, Celebrations, and Rituals, available at: <https://www.mfa.tj/ru/main/view/3960/zakon-respubliki-tadzhikistan-ob-uporyadochenii-traditsii-torzhestv-t-obryadov-v-respublike-tadzhikistan> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁵⁸ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Par. 33:

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf>. Similar concerns were raised by the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues after his country visit to Tajikistan in October 2023: Human Rights Council, Visit to Tajikistan: report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, 13 February 2024, par. 27 and paras. 29: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4041618?ln=en&v=pdf> (both sources last accessed on 22 August 2024).

³⁵⁹ Interview identifier #407, with a person who had performed as a toastmaster at weddings in GBAO, conducted on 12 March 2023 via video call on condition of anonymity.

³⁶⁰ Rushon Media, “Навруз 2023 Хоруг’ (Нуриддини Афзалшо, Орази Олимшо, Ахмади Саидик, Шухрат Сайнаков Гебали Худоберди)”, 26 March 2023:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9QkBF4CdoU> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). This video of the Nowruz celebration in Khorugh city park on 21 March 2023, which was sponsored by the authorities, was broadcasted on regional TV. Only songs in Tajik languages were performed, even if popular songs in Pamiri languages dedicated to Nowruz do exist. Pamiri girls can be seen dancing in dresses from the Kulyab region, accompanied by a song praising the arrival of “the new era” (25:27).

³⁶¹ For example, Imamat Day in Bar Khorugh neighbourhood of Khorugh in 2021: Pamir Today, “Рузи ба тахт нишини / Imamat day”, 11 July 2022:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PogRNgoydKY>. Maysara Anvarova, Ruzi Nur in Gulaken neighbourhood of Khorugh in 2021:

<https://www.facebook.com/maysara.anvarova/videos/1259525581301489> (last accessed in April 2023).

³⁶² The activist and farmer Sorbon Yunoev was reportedly convicted in August 2022 on charges of religious extremism because he had been one of the organizers of the *Ruzi Nur* festivities in 2020. This was reported by the Telegram channel of the news portal Pamir Inside which is known for its reliable sources in GBAO: Pamir Inside’s Telegram channel, 23 August 2022: <https://t.me/pamirinside/1201>. See the opinion of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention of the UN HRC adopted in March 2024 referring to charges for organizing a peaceful sports event: Human Rights Council, Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its ninety-ninth session, 18–27 March 2024, 5 June 2024, p. 55: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/detention-wg/opinions/session99/a-hrc-wgad-2024-18-tajikistan-aev.pdf> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024). The Working Group came to the conclusion that the deprivation of liberty of Sorbon Yunoev was arbitrary.

international human rights law, as the country is bound by, under the ICCPR and other international human rights instruments” [emphasis added].³⁶³

While they denied the existence of Pamiris as an ethnic and linguistic minority, the authorities recognized Ismailis as a religious minority. However, the devotion shown to the Aga Khan by wide parts of the Pamiri Ismaili population conflicted with the officially endorsed practice of promoting imagery centred on the person of President Emomali Rahmon.³⁶⁴ The relations between the Tajikistani state and the Ismaili Imam cooled down in the 2010s. The Aga Khan was not invited to visit Tajikistan on the occasion of his Diamond Jubilee in 2018.³⁶⁵

After the 2021/22 crackdown, the pressure on the practice of faith by Pamiri Ismailis intensified significantly. The authorities implemented measures to restrict religious freedom, aiming to assert state control over religious practice.³⁶⁶ They not only destroyed the giant Ismaili flag inscribed on the mountain slopes above Khorugh,³⁶⁷ and closed most places of worship, including all mahalla (neighbourhood) Jamatkhanas (prayer and community houses) in Khorugh,³⁶⁸ and religious education institutions like the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB).³⁶⁹ They also banned and penalized collective prayer in private homes which had not been registered with the state as places of worship, reportedly fining at least two individuals for hosting such collective prayers.³⁷⁰

One Pamiri Ismaili who had lived in GBAO until summer 2022 recalls:

“We used to go to the neighbours in the evenings, to pray and to sit together. It was some 20 or 25 persons sitting together. [...] [In our area,] we met [a certain number of] days in our house, then [a certain number of] days at a neighbour’s place, then [a certain number of] days at another neighbour’s place, and so on. [...] [When we had already left from GBAO, in summer 2022,] relatives told us that the government had closed everything, that they had come and told the people that they should pray at [their own] home.”³⁷¹

While the two main Jamatkhanas in Khorugh and Dushanbe remained open for prayer, the authorities reportedly banned educational and cultural activities.³⁷² In certain villages the authorities encouraged residents to remove portraits of the Aga Khan, which are very common in Ismaili homes worldwide.³⁷³

Ethics and Knowledge courses, developed by the ITREB and agreed upon with the Ministry of Education, had been taught in schools in GBAO by volunteer teachers as an optional subject after regular lessons. After the teaching of the course in schools had been temporarily suspended in February 2021, the authorities tolerated its teaching in private houses.³⁷⁴ After the crackdown in May 2022, individuals who had taught the course on a voluntary basis were interrogated and threatened with criminal prosecution.³⁷⁵ Religious

³⁶³ United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Preliminary Observations and recommendations, 20 April 2023, p. 2: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/religion/SR-FORB-CV-Tajikistan-EOM-Statement.docx> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁶⁴ Eurasianet, “Tajikistan: Authorities intensify war on Ismailis, other Muslims”, 9 September 2022: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-authorities-intensify-war-on-ismailis-other-muslims>. According to Radio Ozodi governmental Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Feasts and Ceremonies had reportedly expressed concerns in 2019 that the slogans welcoming the Aga Khan on the mountain slopes above Khorugh could be interpreted as a preference of the Aga Khan to the President: Radio Ozodi, “Власти Таджикистана закрыли исмаилитскую образовательную организацию – источники”, 6 September 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/32021431.html> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁶⁵ In contrast, he visited most other countries with a significant Ismaili population “at the invitation of their respective governments”: Felix Corley, “Tajikistan: Regime bans Ismaili home prayers, lessons for children”, *Forum 18*, 21 February 2023: https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2811 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁶⁶ This reflects the “highly impoverished understanding” of religious freedom by the authorities of Tajikistan which the UN Special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief noted after her visit to Tajikistan in April 2023: United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Preliminary Observations and recommendations, 20 April 2023, p. 3: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/religion/SR-FORB-CV-Tajikistan-EOM-Statement.docx> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁶⁷ The 30x15 meters Ismaili flag had been inscribed on the slopes above Bar Khorugh neighbourhood of Khorugh in 2007 to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of the Aga Khan’s Imamate and had held deep significance for Pamiri Ismailis. Despite pressure from the authorities to remove the flag, Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov, an influential informal community leader in Bar Khorugh defended the existence of the flag, and it became a symbol of resistance against state interference in religious matters. Its destruction soon after the alleged extrajudicial execution of Mamadbokirov was reported. On 13 June 2022, the Telegram channel of the news portal Pamir Inside published a photo from its local sources which showed the site of the destroyed flag inscription: <https://t.me/pamirinside/969> (last accessed on 23 August 2024). On a satellite image taken in July 2021 and available in Google Earth, the Ismaili flag is clearly visible (37.492831N, 71.577498E). On a satellite image dating from July 2022 and available in Google Earth, it is missing. It was later replaced with the governmental slogan “Tajikistan, forward!”: Interview identifier #301, with a person who visited GBAO in summer 2022, conducted on 18 June 2023 via video call.

³⁶⁸ Felix Corley, “Tajikistan: Ismaili religious leader jailed, prayer houses closed”, *Forum 18*, 17 October 2022, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2782 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁶⁹ Eurasianet, “Authorities intensify war on Ismailis, other Muslims”, 9 September 2022: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-authorities-intensify-war-on-ismailis-other-muslims>; U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2023 Annual Report*, April 2023, p. 43: <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023%20Annual%20Report.pdf> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁷⁰ Felix Corley, “Tajikistan: Regime bans Ismaili home prayers, lessons for children”, *Forum 18*, 21 February 2023: https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2811 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁷¹ Interview identifier #222, with a Pamiri Ismaili living in Khorugh during the first months of 2022, conducted on 13 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

³⁷² Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Par. 75: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁷³ Felix Corley, “Tajikistan: Regime bans Ismaili home prayers, lessons for children”, *Forum 18*, 21 February 2023: https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2811 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁷⁴ U.S. Department of State, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Tajikistan*: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/tajikistan/> (last accessed on 7 August 2024).

³⁷⁵ Pamir Inside, “Преподавателям предмета ‘Ахлок ва маърифат’ в ГБАО угрожают уголовным преследованием”, 8 February 2023: <https://pamirinside.org/ugrova-prepodavatelzam-khoroga/>, and Felix Corley, “Tajikistan: Regime bans Ismaili home prayers, lessons for children”, *Forum 18*, 21 February 2023: https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2811 (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024). This was confirmed by one interlocutor who had been a volunteer teacher and reported to have been harassed by SCNS officers and summoned for questioning about teaching Ismaili curriculum: Interview identifier #413, with a Pamiri Ismaili person who had worked as a volunteer teacher in GBAO, conducted on 26 May 2023 via video call on condition of anonymity. One interlocutor indicated that these

literature, in particular the textbook which had been used for the Ethics and Knowledge course, was seized.³⁷⁶ This reflects the “severe control of children’s freedom of religion or belief” noted by the UN Special Rapporteur in the report on her country visit to Tajikistan in April 2023. The Special Rapporteur emphasized that this “weighs particularly heavily on persons belonging to religious and belief minorities, as their ability to maintain their culture and religion is even more challenged by such limitations.”³⁷⁷

In Dushanbe, the authorities reportedly increased their efforts to exert control over the organizations of the Ismaili community (Jamat) in early 2024 by placing their chosen candidates as the head of the Ismaili Center in Dushanbe and in key positions within the Ismaili National Council. Such appointments had previously been made by the religious hierarchy under the Aga Khan. Also, according to one interlocutor, an individual presenting himself as a SCNS representative, who is neither Pamiri nor Ismaili, was observed as regularly present at prayers in the Ismaili Center in Dushanbe, without observing cultural and religious norms like removing shoes in the prayer hall.³⁷⁸ The Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion and belief noted in the report on her country visit to Tajikistan in April 2023: “[w]hile surveillance, imposed reporting and intrusion apply across the board, they have a disproportionate and disparate impact on minority religions.”³⁷⁹

Going beyond the purpose of establishing state control, the authorities also reportedly sought to further interfere with religious practice when, in April 2023, the Ismaili Jamatkhana and centre in Khorugh, and local believers, were requested to discontinue the practice of men and women praying together, thus putting into question a core element of Ismaili religious practice. Reportedly, they later suspended the enforcement of such gender-separated prayer.³⁸⁰

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief emphasized that the closure of Ismaili prayer houses and the banning of educational and cultural activities and of collective Ismaili prayers in private homes, amongst other practices, “amounts to collective punishment of Ismailis.”³⁸¹

coercive measures were intended to make volunteer teachers testify against ITREB and create a pretext to ban the organization: Interview identifier #412, with a Pamiri Ismaili person with work experience in one of organizations affiliated to AKDN, conducted on 22 April 2023 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

³⁷⁶ Felix Corley, “Tajikistan: Regime bans Ismaili home prayers, lessons for children”, *Forum 18*, 21 February 2023: https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2811. In the report about her country visit to Tajikistan, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief wrote that according to the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations Act, “the Government must approve the production, import, export, sale and distribution of all the religious literature of registered religious groups, which constitutes in effect a ban on religious materials for unregistered religious groups”: Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Para. 36: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁷⁷ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Para. 61: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁷⁸ Interview identifier #414, with a Pamiri Ismaili connected to one of the organizations affiliated to the Ismaili Jamat, conducted on 22 February 2024 via audio call on condition of anonymity.

³⁷⁹ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Para. 31: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁸⁰ Interview identifier #405, with a Pamiri Ismaili with work experience in one of the organizations affiliated to the Ismaili Jamat, conducted on 12 April 2023 via video call on condition of anonymity. The practice of women and men praying alongside one another was described by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief: Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Para. 59: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁸¹ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, Visit to Tajikistan, 18 January 2024, Para. 75: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4036138?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

7. DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Arbitrary prosecution and threats of prosecution have forced hundreds of Pamiris to leave Tajikistan, looking for safety in the Russian Federation or seeking asylum in European or North American countries.³⁸² At the same time, the continuing repression and ethnoreligious persecution, as well as the curbing of access to resources in GBAO and the deterioration of positive future outlooks³⁸³ triggered the emigration of additional individuals and whole families abroad, or internal migration to the capital Dushanbe or other parts of Tajikistan. One Pamiri activist described this exodus of the Pamiri population from their homeland: “A devastating number of people are fleeing. [...] It has never been like this. In the 1990s it was much worse, but on the contrary people went there [to GBAO].”³⁸⁴

One person who spent several days in Khorugh in summer 2023 summarized the conversations with residents:

“I could not feel any joy. It seemed as if every second sentence was ‘I want to leave’. Almost every interlocutor told me about people who had undertaken desperate journeys and made it to the US or to Europe. The general perception of the residents is that everything is different from previously [before the crackdown in 2021/22]. The people do not see any future there anymore.”³⁸⁵

One Pamiri who spent several years living in other regions of Tajikistan summarized several reasons of the emigration dynamic:

“We were a free people, everything was good and calm at our’s [in the Pamirs], we were supporting each other. [Then] they attacked the civilian population. Not everybody wants to stay if [you risk that] they arrest you for any bagatelle issue. There are not many opportunities to earn [money]. Our people are not able to work with corruption [schemes]. Most of the youth has left because of their problems [with the security forces], they did not want to be detained.”³⁸⁶

A former informal leader of a local community described his perception of the mechanics of the ongoing demographic change as the local people’s response to external pressure; this perception is shared by several others who have been interviewed for this report:

“They [the authorities] artificially create pressure so that everybody leaves and forgets their holy place. And then they [Sunnis from western Tajikistan] come themselves. Their people will gradually arrive. [...] And after 50 years, our descendants will read that the Pamirs were once ... that Ismailis were living there. They will learn about our history. [...] In the market they [Pamiri Ismaili shopkeepers] are gradually selling [up]. There is pressure on small businesses. Over time they will take everything. [...] They [international donors] have provided us with the conditions so that we could stay in the Pamirs. But you see how it is now. [...] And we, who have been living there for thousands of years, are chased off our land. [...] Thousands of Pamiris are leaving their homeland [...] We do not want to be left without a homeland and wander around the world [...].”³⁸⁷

Considering the unreliability of statistics in Tajikistan in general and the fact that Pamiris are not counted as such in the census but as “Tajiks”, there is no statistical instrument to monitor the ongoing demographic changes in GBAO. Various indicators, however, suggest

³⁸² Hursand Hurramov, “Новый исход: сотни выходцев из ГБАО бегут в страны Европы”, 19 August 2022: <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/31995404.html>. The number of asylum applications by citizens of Tajikistan in the European Union was significantly higher in 2022 than in the years before, including pre-COVID 2018 and 2019: see *Asylum applicants by type, citizenship, age and sex - monthly data*: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYAPPCTZM_custom_6627917/default/line?lang=en (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024). The peak in autumn 2022 (August 2022: 135 applications, September 2022: 80 applications, October 2022: 140 applications, November 2022: 200 applications) coincided with the aftermath of the crackdown in GBAO. One interlocutor with strong networks among emigrees estimated that around 300 Pamiris had arrived in Germany in 2022 and applied for asylum: Interview identifier #221, with a Pamiri man who spent several months in Germany in 2023, conducted on 14 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

³⁸³ For example, the authorities closed or instigated the self-liquidation of facilities in GBAO affiliated to the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) after May 2022, including educational facilities like kindergartens and the highly renowned Aga Khan Lycee, as well as the Aga Khan Medical Centre in Khorugh. This was reported by Eurasianet, an independent news organization specialized on Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Eurasianet, “Tajikistan puts the squeeze on Aga Khan-linked entities”, 28 July 2022: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-puts-the-squeeze-on-aga-khan-linked-entities>, as well Farangis Najibullah, Mirzonabi Kholiqzod, “Amid Crackdown In Restive Region, Tajikistan Targets Properties Linked To Aga Khan”, RFE/RL, 26 July 2023: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-crackdown-gorno-badakhshan-properties-aga-khan/32520966.html> (both sources last accessed on 23 August 2024). Such measures were perceived by many residents as contributing to the degradation of quality of education and healthcare.

³⁸⁴ Interview identifier #213, with a Pamiri man, conducted on 19 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

³⁸⁵ Interview identifier #302, with a person who visited GBAO in summer 2023, conducted on 1 August 2023 via video call on condition of anonymity.

³⁸⁶ Interview identifier #224, with a Pamiri living in a region of Tajikistan outside of GBAO, conducted on 20 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

³⁸⁷ Interview identifier #210, with a former informal leader of a local community in GBAO, conducted on 17 May 2023 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

the significance of the emigration. One interlocutor reported in July 2022 that an extraordinarily high number, of approximately 40 jeeps with passengers, were leaving from Khorugh to Dushanbe every day.³⁸⁸ In February 2023, another interlocutor reported that at a funeral, there had not been enough young men in the village to perform the funeral duties traditionally assigned to them.³⁸⁹ In August 2023, writer Ato Mirkodja, a member of the Union of Writers of Tajikistan, wrote in a Facebook post that out of 530 former residents of Vuzh village (Shughnan district), only 230 were left (43 percent), and that in 20 out of 80 households (25 percent), nobody had remained at all.³⁹⁰ One interviewee working for a government agency reported in January 2024 that in a recent assembly of government officials in GBAO, the number of around vacant 3,400 houses in the districts of GBAO with a majority Pamiri Ismaili population had been mentioned.³⁹¹ One interlocutor reported in February 2024 that there was a massive shortage of dairy products on the market in Khorugh because the number of peasant households holding cows in the villages around the town had dramatically decreased.³⁹² One interlocutor during a visit in GBAO in summer 2023 was informed by a young resident of Khorugh that all former classmates from school and all former fellow students from the university group had left the town.³⁹³ As well, the high number of vacancies in the public administration in 2023 and the difficulties of the authorities to recruit staff indicates an abrupt lack of local workforce.³⁹⁴

The extent to which this widespread emigration of indigenous Pamiris from GBAO was intended by the authorities, as suggested by some interlocutors (as above), and by ADC Memorial in 2017,³⁹⁵ requires further research beyond the scope of this current publication.

Against the background of mass incarceration and mass emigration of young Pamiri men and the deployment of ethnic Tajik men in GBAO as officers of security agencies or state officials, there have been reports that security forces enticed and coerced Pamiri women to intermarry with Tajik men, such as by blackmailing the families of the former.³⁹⁶ The testimony of one Pamiri who worked at a place where government workers frequently gathered suggests that this was explicitly encouraged by government officials:

"After [...] a specific event organized by the authorities], I overheard one woman saying: 'Yes, he [an unspecified government official] was right, the Pamiri [girls] should marry Tajik [men]. It will be easier for them. The Pamiri people will be [more] compatible.'"³⁹⁷

An exiled human rights defender told the research team that he had been informed by a former MIA employee about a meeting of MIA officers in GBAO in summer 2022 in which the former employee had participated. According to this source, when complaints about alleged sexual violence by MIA officers against Pamiri women were being discussed in the meeting, a top-level official from the ministry in Dushanbe suggested to attendees to take Pamiri women as their unofficial second or third wives so that they give birth to Tajiks.³⁹⁸

Such reports are an uncomfortable echo of requests by President Rahmon. In August 2020, he singled out the residents of Khorugh city and the surrounding Shughnan and Roshtkala districts, publicly requesting that state officials in GBAO promote mixed marriages of Pamiris with people from other regions of Tajikistan:

"It's a problem. [...] For example, the town of Khorugh, Shughnan, Roshtkala, what will come out of it? What will it lead to? Sometimes there are families in Khorugh where there are four children with disabilities by birth. Sometimes there are three, two [children per family]. This is all because of close blood relationships. When we do not allow our children to marry people from other regions? This is a fact and should not

³⁸⁸ Interview identifier #218, with a Pamiri living in Khorugh, conducted on 7 August 2022 by a video call on condition of anonymity. Each jeep can typically transport seven passengers. Usually, the seasonal peak of traffic from Khorugh to Dushanbe is in late August and early September before the summer holidays end. As well, during summer 2022, the Russian political scientist Andrey Serenko several times reported on his Telegram channel about massive emigration from GBAO: <https://t.me/anserenko/4570>, <https://t.me/anserenko/4614>, <https://t.me/anserenko/5021> (all links last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁸⁹ Interview identifier #403, with a Pamiri man living in a village in GBAO, conducted on 17 February 2023 via video call on condition of anonymity. Tradition requires the young men from the village or the neighbourhood to dig the grave, carry the body and support the ceremony in other ways. In the interlocutor's village with around 150 households the community had to request support from neighbouring villages because not enough young and middle-aged men had remained. According to one interviewee, a resident of another village in GBAO had raised similar concerns about the lack of male youth which made it impossible to sustain the traditional funeral practices: Interview identifier #303, with a person who visited GBAO in autumn 2023, conducted on 17 February 2024 by email on condition of anonymity.

³⁹⁰ Ato Mirkodja's Facebook account, 11 August 2023:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02HcmQHnKQTNwFxfGQB44LUE9mbw1UKKdWAHW1hGvi2sKcWUWU9p83pXcmQV2f2qcGxl&id=100090414931467 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁹¹ Interview identifier #410, with a Pamiri employee of a government agency in GBAO, conducted on 31 January 2024 by a phone call on condition of anonymity.

³⁹² Interview identifier #223, with a Pamiri living in Khorugh, conducted on 14 February 2024 via video call on condition of anonymity.

³⁹³ Interview identifier #303, with a person who visited GBAO in autumn 2023, conducted on 17 February 2024 by email on condition of anonymity.

³⁹⁴ As reflected on the newspaper *Рӯзномаи Нигири Хоруг*'s Facebook page, the Khorugh city administration announced 6 positions on 11 October 2023:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0mDKL3Xm989T7w3C9RSyPtUmhY5SU6esrQM18JxZBohK4wWy4B9Hs3QgUrK1PrVi&id=61551207534554.

Four of them had to be reannounced on 19 January 2024 in an announcement with additional eight vacancies:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02xWiPfo4Rut6AkyL98j8LNLJpqnsQDSmy8HBLZDLdgyxEZ6K8Dv1WumVjbMFW3RI&id=61551207534554.

Only nine persons applied for these 12 vacancies:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid025WKcsi3ZJraahKidjafpRiLewkGCw9ceB5huEtruxSaHJ7Cwg8eiMZDKV1vgA8I&id=61551207534554 (all sources last accessed on 23 August 2024). In March 2023, the Supreme Court published vacancies in the judiciary: <https://sud.tj/markazi-matbuot/elonho/592/> (accessed in March 2023, link no longer accessible). The number of vacancies in GBAO (12) almost equalled the number of vacancies in Sughd (14) and Khatlon regions (15) in spite of the fact that each of the two regions has more than ten times the population of GBAO.

³⁹⁵ ADC Memorial, *Alternative Report on Tajikistan's Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Connection with the UN CERD Consideration of the Republic of Tajikistan's Ninth to Eleventh Periodic Reports for 2012–2015*, p. 8: <https://adcmemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/TajCERDeng3.pdf> (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

³⁹⁶ Interview identifier #301, with a person who visited GBAO in summer 2022, conducted on 18 June 2023 via video call. This interlocutor had heard about efforts by the security forces to promote intermarriage from three different sources.

³⁹⁷ Interview identifier #222, with a Pamiri living in Khorugh during the first months of 2022, conducted on 13 February 2024 via voice call on condition of anonymity.

³⁹⁸ Interview identifier #234, with a Pamiri human rights defender in exile, conducted on 9 July 2024 in the country of residence (outside of Tajikistan) on condition of anonymity.

be ignored. Why do we make our families unhappy with our own hands, especially the young people? Just think about it. If there is a disabled child in a family, how can that family be happy? You all need to work on that.”³⁹⁹

At that time, Shughnan and Roshtkala districts were the administrative units in those areas with a Pamiri Ismaili majority in which the population was politically most active and which were in the focus of the security agencies.

³⁹⁹ Намнаво, “ЭМОМАЛИ РАҲМОН ГУФТ ПРАБЛЕМАҲАЙ - Раиси Бадахшон Дар Пеши Чаноб | ГАПҲОЕ ГУФТ БИНЕН!”, 4 September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYtC7vIGuB8>, min. 0:00 (last accessed on 23 August 2024).

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the recent years, the Tajikistani authorities have increasingly eroded the rights, and sought to erase the ethnic, cultural and religious identity, of the Pamiris, whom they also refuse to recognize as a minority. Security forces from other parts of the country have been deployed in GBAO in growing numbers, peaceful or overwhelmingly peaceful protests against policies and decisions by the central authorities have been dispersed by means of unlawful force, and any expression of dissent brutally suppressed. Informal Pamiri leaders and influencers have been silenced or eliminated, and numerous others targeted for surveillance, unfounded prosecution and imprisonment, and coerced into speaking against their own community. The local economy and people's economic and other wellbeing have suffered, including via their socioeconomic marginalization, and the use of Pamiri languages and expression of Pamiri identity and culture, as well as traditional religious practices, have been suppressed.

Widespread human rights violations have been documented, committed in violation of both domestic law and international obligations, against a backdrop of impunity for such violations. A comprehensive system of electronic and in-person surveillance has been built to control and intimidate the Pamiri population, and limit the ability of independent civil society organizations and institutions to document violations. One impact of these repressions has been the impoverishment of the Pamiri minority and the curtailment of its socio-economic potential. Independent human rights monitors raising concerns, including various UN rapporteurs, HRW and Amnesty International, amongst others, have been left without substantive if any response from the Tajikistani authorities.

8.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International urges the authorities of Tajikistan to take the following steps:

- End immediately any reprisals against members of the Pamiri minority and any dissenting voices, and respect the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and all other human rights, for all, and refrain from restricting these rights unnecessarily and disproportionately, including when protecting public order or national security;
- Immediately put an end to the practice of prohibition and dispersal of peaceful assemblies;
- End the use of unlawful and arbitrary force by police and other law enforcement agencies, including its use against protest participants, individuals named criminal suspects, complainants and eyewitnesses of human rights violations by law enforcement officers, and others;
- End the use of unlawful force against any individuals in custody;
- Immediately release the imprisoned members of the Commission of 44, and acquit them of their convictions under terrorism-related and other trumped-up charges;
- Release immediately and unconditionally all other people detained solely for exercising their human rights, including the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, association and expression, including Pamiri human rights defenders, other civil society activists, journalists, informal community leaders and others, as well as all other Pamiris arbitrarily arrested, detained and/or imprisoned, such as relatives and close associates of informal community leaders, complainants and witnesses of human rights violations by members of law enforcement agencies, and others;
- Take immediate steps to end the use of torture and other ill-treatment and other human rights violations by members of law enforcement agencies, including physical, sexual and other violence, arbitrary arrests and unfounded prosecution, the practice of detention of people in conditions that amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment;

and in particular:

- Promptly, effectively and impartially investigate all allegations of extrajudicial execution, unlawful killing, torture and other ill-treatment and all other reports of human rights violations, including fabrication of criminal charges, with a view to identify and bring to account, in fair trial proceedings, anyone reasonably suspected of perpetrating, or being complicit, in such human rights violations, including commanding officers and any state officials on whose orders or under whose acquiescence these violations have been committed;
- Immediately suspend in their duties any law enforcement official, regardless of rank, suspected of responsibility for or complicity in extrajudicial execution, unlawful killing, acts of torture and other ill-treatment, or other human rights violations, including fabrication of criminal charges, pending an impartial and independent investigation of the respective allegations, and prosecution in fair trial proceedings;
- Regularly publish full and detailed statistics, national and local, on reported violations and the outcome of the respective investigation and prosecution;
- Fully respect and protect the right to a fair trial, including by ensuring effective protection of any detained person from torture and other ill-treatment, providing them with immediate and unimpeded access to a lawyer of their choice, and access to effective legal remedies including an opportunity to challenge the legality of their detention and of criminal or administrative proceedings against them, or challenge the admissibility/validity of evidence against the defendant, in front of a genuinely independent and competent judiciary;
- Ensure direct, effective and unimpeded access to forensic medical expertise for all alleged victims of torture and other ill-treatment, and ensure that the forensic medical examination is conducted in full in accordance to the Istanbul Protocol (Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment);
- Immediately put an end to the practice of intimidation and harassment of victims, complainants and witnesses of human rights violations by law enforcement and other officials, and guarantee and ensure safety of complainants and victims, including via effective witness protection measures;
- Fully respect and protect the human rights of lawyers and implement in law, policy and practice protections provided for by international law and standards, in particular by the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers. Immediately ensure that lawyers in GBAO and throughout Tajikistan are adequately safeguarded and are able to perform their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment, reprisals or improper interference;
- End the practice of arbitrary designation of organizations and groups as “extremist” or “terrorist”, and the practice of arbitrarily describing individuals in official, media and other communications as “extremists” or “terrorist” or otherwise stating or implying that they have committed a criminal offence, until and unless the respective determination has been made, or the individuals have been found guilty of respective charges, in court proceedings that fully respect international fair trial standards;
- Ensure that women and girls live free of gender-based violence and harassment, and in particular:
 - Take measures to protect women from discrimination and violence, effectively investigate all respective allegations, and ensure that all perpetrators of violence against women are brought to justice;
 - Create an environment which supports women and addresses violence, by building community structures and processes to protect women, providing assistance to survivors of violence, raising awareness about violence against women;
 - Provide all victims of human rights violations in GBAO, and across Tajikistan, with full and adequate reparations for the damage suffered, including measures of restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition;
 - Repeal or amend legislation pertinent to terrorism-related offences and other public order provisions that lack legal clarity, are open to abuse, and/or are used to criminalize the peaceful expression of dissent; bring any other legislation in full conformity with Tajikistan’s obligations under international human rights law;
- Effectively, independently and impartially investigate the systemic racial discrimination against Pamiris, particularly in the criminal justice system;
- Take effective measures to implement legal and policy reforms to fully protect, promote and guarantee freedom of religion or belief without discrimination;
- Ensure access to effective, transparent and accessible remedies for all victims of any discrimination and of other human rights violations;
- Jointly with all affected rights holders, and specifically with the effective and genuine participation of the Pamiri communities, review all laws, policies and practices that may be discriminatory, and take all necessary measures to ensure that these are

fully compliant with Tajikistan's international human rights obligations, including by repealing or amending the relevant legislation and policies and ending relevant practices, and monitoring the actions of state officials;

- Ensure that members of Pamiri communities are able to fully enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights. Take action to address ongoing socio-economic hardships, by assigning adequate resources including through comprehensive social protection;
- Work with Pamiri communities to develop comprehensive programmes to eliminate discrimination in the criminal justice system and advocacy of discrimination and hatred in online and offline domains;
- Cooperate fully with international partners and organisations, including the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council, amongst others, including by extending an invitation and ensuring their immediate, full and unhindered access to the country, including GBAO, and, where so requested, provide them with direct and effective access to the penitentiary institutions and all other places where individuals may be deprived of their liberty including police compounds, including access to persons deprived of their liberty held there, and provide them with all necessary access to the information and documents as may be requested, and access to victims of human rights violations and their family members, lawyers and human rights defenders amongst others;
- Allow full and unimpeded access of civil society, academic researchers, other independent experts, to GBAO to assess and report on the human rights situation.

Amnesty International is calling on international and regional organisations and human rights mechanisms and individual governments to:

- Use all appropriate influence to ensure that human rights violations in GBAO and across Tajikistan are subject to scrutiny and action in international forums and by relevant mechanisms. At every opportunity, actively raise concern over the ongoing widespread human rights violations in GBAO and across Tajikistan, and instigate, support and encourage any efforts and bilateral and multilateral levels to take action to oppose and stop them and to provide remedy for their victims;
- Take initiative in monitoring, documenting and reporting human rights violations in GBAO and throughout Tajikistan, and encourage and support other international human rights monitors to do so, including by seeking access for monitors to GBAO and their safe and unimpeded access to survivors of human rights violations and other key informants, within and outside of Tajikistan, assisting their efforts to investigate and document violations, protect and support their victims, secure key evidence, and ultimately ensure that their perpetrators are held accountable;
- Urge the Tajikistani authorities to allow full access to UN special procedures in particular, and to provide substantive responses to their communications including genuine answers to their questions and concerns;
- Seek information from the Tajikistani authorities on the fate, whereabouts and conditions of detention of Pamiri human rights defenders, other civil society activists, journalists, informal community leaders and all other Pamiris arbitrarily arrested, detained and/or imprisoned, and seek their immediate release;
- Use whatever leverage they may have to put pressure on the Tajikistani authorities to stop other ongoing violations of human rights, provide adequate reparations for all victims;
- Support and actively explore any means of achieving accountability for the perpetrators of unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment and other widespread human rights violations in GBAO and across Tajikistan, via international investigation and prosecution mechanisms, including universal jurisdiction;
- Respect the principle of non-refoulement, and not forcibly return individuals from GBAO to Tajikistan, or to any third country such as Russia, where they would face the risk of forcible transfer to Tajikistan, where in turn they could be victims of human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest, politically motivated prosecution, torture and other ill-treatment, and unfair trials.

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TAJIKISTAN: REPRISALS AGAINST PAMIRI MINORITY, SUPPRESSION OF LOCAL IDENTITY, CLAMPDOWN ON ALL DISSENT

In Tajikistan's remote Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), the Pamiri minority (which central Tajikistani authorities refuse to regard as such) has faced years of discrimination and prejudice. In recent years, the authorities have stepped up their efforts to suppress the expression of Pamiri identity, and increased the presence of security agencies in GBAO. They responded with brutal reprisals to local discontent and protest, including with unlawful killings of protesters and informal local leaders, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and imprisonment of human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers and activists. The local economy and the local communities' well-being have suffered, leading to Pamiris' socio-economic marginalization, and demographic change in the region.