

PRISONER PROFILE

Prisoner Name: **Bakhrom Kholmatov**

Location: **Tajikistan**

Arrested: **April 2017**



Arrest and background

Tajik pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov is behind bars today because National Security Committee secret police found songbooks and Christian literature including the book, *More than a Carpenter*, during a raid on his church in Tajikistan on April 10, 2017. They claim these books are 'extremist' and as a result charged the church leader with criminal charges related to extremism.

In Tajikistan, all religious literature must undergo state censorship before it can be printed, published, distributed, sold or imported. Those who violate these censorship provisions are liable to punishment. Local Christians believe that because the secret police could not find anything illegal in the activity of the Sunmin Sunbogym Church, they then decided to use the words of Christian hymns and from Christian books against the pastor.

Pastor Bakhrom leads the Sunmin Sunbogym (Good News of Grace) Protestant Church in Khujand, the capital of Sogd region in the north of the country. Police have been raiding other congregations in Sogd, which are part of the same church, since early February.

Sunmin Sunbogym Protestant Church in Khujand was officially registered with the State Committee for Religious Affairs in 1993 as a 'missionary centre'. After the new Religion Law entered into force in 2009, when all registered religious communities were required to re-register to continue to be allowed to exist, the church was re-registered on October 23, 2009. Its affiliated congregations gained local registration.

Despite this, officials closed down a congregation in the town of Konibodom in March after they interrogated, intimidated and beat church members. Some Christians in Konibodom also reportedly lost their jobs, after the secret police put pressure on employers to dismiss them.

Tajik officials frequently use criminal charges related to extremism to persecute those who worship outside state-approved religious communities and also to put pressure on churches, which are officially registered, to co-operate with the state.

Recently state officials have been reported as saying their 'purpose is to close down churches in Tajikistan and take away their property'. Meanwhile, officials in Dushanbe, the capital, have closed down two kindergartens. One was closed apparently because Protestant Christians worked there and the other was shut because officials found a book of Christmas carols on the premises.

On July 10, one of Release's partners in Central Asia confirmed that brother Bakhrom had just been sentenced to three years in prison while urging Release and Christians in the UK to 'pray for him and for all our brothers and sisters in Tajikistan'.

PRAY:

1. For Christians in Sogd region and across Tajikistan, that they will draw their strength from God and look to Him for wisdom and guidance.
2. That God will touch the hearts of secret police officials involved in raids on Sogd churches: pray that He will speak to them through the witness and the courage of the believers.
3. For Pastor Bakhrom, his family and all of his church members; pray they will experience God's presence and help during this testing time.

SEND A CARD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO PASTOR BAKHROM:

Address card to:

Bakhrom Kholmatov

c/o Release International,

PO Box 54,

Orpington,

BR5 4RT.

POST THIS PRISONER PROFILE ON THE BULLETIN BOARD IN YOUR CHURCH:

Post this Prisoner Profile on the bulletin board in your church, Sunday school class or youth group. Share a copy with your pastor, members of your prayer group and other Christian friends.

To read about other Christian Prisoners of Faith, please visit lightinthedarkestplaces.org and click on email sign up.

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