

# Judge in Tajikistan orders Baptist church to close

December 4, 2009

OSLO, Norway (ABP) — A judge in Tajikistan has ordered a Baptist church in the capital city, Dushanbe, to cease meetings in a private home, saying that housing codes and a new religion law require houses of worship to register with the government.

Members of the church [told](#) Forum 18, a Norway-based news service that focuses on religious-liberty disputes, that the Baptists do not want to register as a matter of principle and that Tajikistan's Constitution allows individuals to worship according to their conscience.

Judge Soliya Ismailova of Somoni District Court told Forum 18 the law requires all non-governmental organizations to register and rejected the Baptists' contention that it violates their religious freedom.

Idibek Ziyoyev, chair of the Culture Ministry's Head Department for Religious Affairs, said it is the first time he has ever heard of anyone refusing to register. "If they asked us for registration we would assist them," Ziyoyev told Forum 18 Dec. 1.

The trouble started when authorities raided the church during its regular Friday-evening service Oct. 9. Later the judge told one of the church members that if the meetings continued it would be treated as a criminal matter. Three Baptists were called as witnesses at a trial Oct. 26, but they were not personally penalized.

The Baptists argued that according to the law they do not have to register. A new religion law went into effect in April requiring re-registration of religious bodies. The new law also limits the number of mosques that can

be built, censors religious literature, requires state approval for inviting foreigners for religious visits and restricts religious activity for children.

[One](#) of the poorest countries in the world, Tajikistan is 97 percent Muslim. Protestants comprise less than 1 percent of the population. The Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches of Tajikistan numbers 14 churches with 350 members.

Baptist work in Tajikistan started in 1929, but the Baptist union basically has rebuilt itself since the late 1990s. Before then the country's Baptist churches were almost entirely composed of Russians and the descendants of German settlers. With encouragement from the European Baptist Federation's [Indigenous Missionary Project](#), however, several native Baptist churches have been planted.

Forum 18 said Baptists in Dushanbe have appealed the judge's ruling against them.

*-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.*