

UZBEKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan began to trend negatively. The government of Uzbekistan in some ways departed from its forward-leaning religious freedom reform agenda and resumed the use of certain repressive policies against Muslims and those who advocate on their behalf. Research by USCIRF [found](#) that the government continued to imprison approximately 2,200 political prisoners in connection with their religious activities or real or alleged religious affiliations. Although many of these prisoners were sentenced under the previous regime, the current administration has done little to review their cases systematically or release those wrongfully imprisoned. Moreover, the government added to that figure through the detention, arrest, and imprisonment of unknown numbers of Muslim individuals for peaceful religious activities such as [possessing](#) religious literature or [meeting](#) to pray. Notably, and particularly following the Taliban’s late summer takeover in Afghanistan, authorities in Uzbekistan [detained](#) hundreds of individuals with purported links to the Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir, often based on allegations related to their peaceful religious activity, association, or expression without evidence of the use or advocacy of violence. Over the course of the year, prisoners were allegedly [subjected](#) to beatings and other forms of [torture](#) at the hands of prison authorities.

In June, the government clamped down on citizens’ ability to pursue religious education abroad, [requiring](#) prospective students to obtain permission from the government’s Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) and [recalling](#) over 1,500 students from religious schools in Egypt and Turkey. That same month, government officials [fined](#) employees of news outlets Kun.uz and Azon.uz

for publishing religious material without having submitted it to the CRA for prior approval. On several occasions, law enforcement authorities throughout the country [rounded up](#) Muslim men and forced them to shave their beards, and police in the cities of Bukhara and Samarqand reportedly [warned](#) Shi’a Muslims against posting religious materials on their social media accounts.

In July, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev [signed](#) into law changes to Uzbekistan’s “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” law. The changes resulted from more than three years of effort to revise this legislation that governs virtually all religious activity in the country. Despite having received extensive feedback from international partners, including USCIRF and the U.S. Department of State, the government declined to incorporate many recommendations to bring the law in line with international standards. While the amended law [presented](#) some improvements—halving the number of members required for a religious community to obtain registration from 100 to 50 and removing a provision that prohibited wearing religious clothing—it preserved many of the previous legislation’s most problematic and restrictive elements. Of note, the law maintained bans on unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and missionary activity; placed limitations on the location of religious rites and ceremonies; and continued to require the official review and approval of all religious literature and related materials. Similarly, a draft version of the Criminal Code published in February indicated that the government would likely retain provisions commonly used against political and religious prisoners, which Human Rights Watch has [asserted](#) “violate the rights to freedom of speech, association, and religion.”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Uzbekistan on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the government of Uzbekistan to revise the 1998 religion law, as amended in 2021, and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards, including by removing registration requirements on religious communities, permitting the possession and distribution of religious literature, and permitting the sharing of religious beliefs;
- Press at the highest levels for the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and press the government of Uzbekistan to treat prisoners humanely and allow for independent prison monitoring; and
- Allocate funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and U.S. Embassy in Tashkent to provide litigation support to individuals and religious communities prosecuted in connection with their peaceful religious activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Uzbekistan’s Religious and Political Prisoners: Addressing a Legacy of Repression](#)
- **Podcast:** [Uzbekistan’s Religious and Political Prisoners](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Concerned by New Uzbekistan Religion Law](#)
- **Podcast:** [Uzbekistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back](#)

Background

The government of Uzbekistan estimates the population of the country at around 34 million people. Between 88 and 96 percent of people [identify](#) as Sunni Muslim; one percent identify as Shi'a Muslim; 2.2 percent identify as Russian Orthodox Christian; and 1.8 percent identify as atheist, Baha'i, Buddhist, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Protestant, or a member of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Over the past few years, the government pursued unprecedented reform and sought out recommendations from the international community to improve conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Uzbekistan. In 2021, however, the government appeared to cease some of those efforts, resuming a number of repressive practices against Muslim individuals and dismissing continued calls for Parliament to further revise its changes to the "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" law.

Renewed Repression and Imprisonment of Muslims

While the government's recent expansion of religious freedom did not generally focus on members of the country's Muslim majority, many Muslims nevertheless noted positive changes under the reform agenda of the last several years, which better enabled them to practice and express their beliefs. Events of the past year, though, have led observers to [characterize](#) the government's shifting approach as a renewed "campaign on non-state Islam" (Islam practiced outside of that which is specifically promulgated and permitted by the state), with officials "reverting to restrictive practices" commonly used under the previous regime. Principally, the government [continues to incarcerate](#) roughly 2,200 individuals on religious grounds and has resumed prosecuting and imprisoning others on similar charges, [subjecting](#) some of them to torture.

Many arrests were tied to an alleged connection to Hizb ut-Tahrir or other groups the government has deemed "extremist," but the evidence used is of a religious nature. In addition, some arrests have been linked directly to speech on religious subjects or the possession of religious texts. In June and July, authorities detained Muslim blogger Fazilhoja Arifhojaev twice—for 15 days and five months, respectively—after he questioned a progovernment imam. Law enforcement then [opened a criminal case](#) against Arifhojaev after discovering a months-old Facebook post he had shared on the subject of Muslims congratulating non-Muslims on their religious holidays. After the end of the reporting period, he received a sentence of 7.5 years in prison. Odilbek Hojabekov, a Muslim who [received](#) a five-year suspended sentence for bringing unauthorized Islamic literature into the country from the Hajj, had a new warrant [issued](#) for his arrest in October following a change in the authorities' testimony. Muslim Laziz Asadov reportedly [fled the country](#) in December after the State Security Service raided his home and seized two Qur'ans, among other possessions, in what he believed was a reprisal for his public criticism of the government's religious policies.

Uzbekistan's Shi'a Muslim minority also continued to endure difficulties. In March, a court in the city of Samarqand [fined](#) Shi'a Muslim Rashid Ibrahimov under the Administrative Code for having unauthorized religious materials on his cell phone. In June, authorities reportedly [warned](#) Shi'a Muslims in the cities of Bukhara and

Samarqand not to publish religious materials on their social media. Shi'a Muslim communities also remained unable to open mosques that had been shut down during the Soviet era, despite an increasing need for the additional space.

Legislative and Policy Changes

The government's [adoption](#) of a revised religion law in July did not deliver the sweeping changes required to comply with international human rights standards. Although the amended version simplified some aspects of the mandatory registration process that religious groups must complete to operate legally, it [did not result](#) in the successful registration of all those that applied, including communities of Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants. The law retained broad prohibitions on unregistered religious activity, missionary activity, and private religious education; in particular, Muslims have stated that they [exert caution](#) when teaching or preaching due to these strict state controls. During the year, the government [fined](#) Baptists and Shi'a Muslims for the unapproved distribution or possession of religious materials, and it [introduced new limitations](#) on citizens' ability to obtain a religious education abroad. In one positive development, in September the Minister of Education [announced](#) that girls would be permitted to wear certain styles of headscarves in schools, but it remained to be seen whether schools would revise internal dress code policies and allow the wearing of religious garb or symbols in practice.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Uzbekistan's bilateral relationship has [focused](#) primarily on addressing regional security and improving economic relations. In the leadup to and aftermath of the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan and the U.S. military's withdrawal in August, both sides have sought increased engagement on mutual security concerns. Discussion of Afghanistan featured prominently in separate meetings between Uzbekistan's foreign minister, [Secretary of State](#) Antony J. Blinken, and [Secretary of Defense](#) Lloyd J. Austin amid [rumors](#) that the U.S. government was gauging interest among a handful of Central Asian states about hosting a continued U.S. military presence in the region. Throughout the year, Uzbekistan also [received several](#) congressional delegations. As part of the U.S. government's efforts to combat the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, the United States [donated](#) over six million vaccine doses to the country.

The State Department frequently [raised](#) human rights concerns with counterparts in Uzbekistan and highlighted persistent issues related to freedom of religion or belief. In December, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu traveled to Uzbekistan to [participate](#) in the inaugural U.S.-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Dialogue, where delegations from [both countries](#) "expressed their interest in further expanding cooperation in promoting respect for freedom of religion or belief." On International Human Rights Day in December, U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan Daniel Rosenblum [cohosted](#) a roundtable—attended by various government officials—on the rehabilitation of former political and religious prisoners.