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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and separation of government and religion. Throughout the year, the government consulted with international legal scholars regarding draft updates to the law on religion, and on August 6, it officially requested a joint opinion from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission. On October 12, the OSCE and Venice Commission issued their joint opinion, stating that while the draft provided some improved protections, it also allowed the government to maintain strict and excessive control over religion and religious freedom. It also stated, “The Draft Law should be substantially revised in order to ensure its full compliance with international human rights standards and OSCE human dimension commitments.” At year’s end, the draft remained under discussion in parliament. The government announced that during the year, it released or reduced the sentences of 243 prisoners detained on religious charges. Some activists and nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives said the government continued ill treatment of prisoners, including physical abuse, and in some cases sought to extend the prison terms of persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of religious extremism or participating in Islamic activity not sanctioned by the government. The government did not provide the number of individuals in custody at year’s end, but it reported that criminal cases were filed against 38 persons for membership in groups or participation in “banned religious extremist activities.” It also reported it initiated 22 criminal cases regarding the “smuggling of banned religious material.” Of the two bloggers detained by police in 2019, one was given a three-year prison sentence. The other received five years’ probation, but in his work as a religious activist broke the terms of his probation and in late November, received a five-year prison sentence. Media reported the government continued to block access to some websites containing religious content, including a Jehovah’s Witnesses site and the site of the international religious freedom organization Forum 18. The government maintained a list of illegal websites it stated were linked to Islamic extremist activity. In August, the government further streamlined procedures for registering religious organizations, but religious groups said the current law on religion continued to make it difficult for groups to register. The government registered eight churches; according to religious groups, there were 17 known churches that still wished to register. Several religious freedom advocates said the majority of the Christian churches registered during the year had predominantly ethnic Russian or Korean membership rather than ethnic Uzbek membership. Members of religious groups whose registration applications the government denied remained unable to practice their religious beliefs without risking criminal prosecution. According to religious freedom advocates and media, controversy over government policies on beards and the wearing of *hijabs* continued. In August, a court sentenced five men to up to 11.5 years in prison and three men to restricted movement after the group discussed their religious beliefs. The Ministry of Interior released a public statement saying minors could freely pray at mosques when accompanied by their parents, siblings, and other close relatives.

Activists and private individuals continued to report social pressure on individuals, particularly those from a Muslim background, against religious conversion. Some members of non-Islamic religious minorities said social stigma against conversion from Islam resulted in difficulties in carrying out burials, forcing relatives to bury individuals in distant cemeteries or to conduct funerals with Islamic religious rites. Members of religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Baptists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, said they continued to face greater societal scrutiny and discrimination.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials met with senior government officials to raise concerns about imprisonment and mistreatment of individuals for their religious beliefs, bureaucratic impediments to the registration of religious minority groups, and allowing children to participate in religious activities. Embassy officials urged the government to ensure that changes to the draft law on religion follow the recommendations of international experts as well as take into account public views. In February, the Secretary of State visited the country and met with Christian, Muslim, and Jewish religious leaders to solicit their views on the state of religious freedom. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom held a series of virtual engagements with senior government officials throughout the year during which he raised the status of the country’s draft religion law and the registration of religious organizations and places of worship as well as the need for the government to allow children to participate in religious activities and to release individuals charged and detained for exercising their faith peacefully. Throughout the year, embassy officials maintained contact with religious groups, human rights activists,

and other civil society representatives to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Topics included the registration of minority religious groups, religious education for children, and concerns about the wearing of hijabs and beards for Muslims.

On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State removed Uzbekistan from the Special Watch List, determining that it no longer engaged in or tolerated “severe violations of religious freedom.” Uzbekistan had previously been designated as a Country of Particular Concern from 2006 to 2017 and was moved to a Special Watch List in 2018 and 2019.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the Uzbekistan government, the population as of October 2020 was close to 34 million. According to U.S. government estimates, 88 percent of the population is Muslim, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates 96 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni of the Hanafi school. The government states that approximately 1 percent of the population is Shia of the Jaafari school, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. Approximately 2.2 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, compared with 3.5 percent in 2019; according to reports and statistics; this number continues to decline with the emigration of ethnic Russian and other Orthodox persons. The government states that the remaining 1.8 percent of the population includes small communities of Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha’is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and atheists. According to members of the Jewish community, the Jewish population – a mix of Ashkenazi and Sephardic (Bukharian) – Jews, numbers fewer than 10,000. Of those, approximately 6,000 Ashkenazi and fewer than 2,000 Bukharian Jews live in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley. The Jewish population continues to decline because of emigration.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that everyone shall have the right to profess or not to profess any religion. According to the constitution, these rights may not encroach on lawful interests, rights, and freedoms of other citizens, the state, or society. The law allows for restricting religious activities when necessary to maintain national security, the social order, or morality. The constitution establishes a secular framework providing for noninterference by the state in the affairs of religious communities, separates the state and religion from each other, and prohibits political parties based on religious principles.

The law on religion details the scope of and limitations on the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief. The law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production, and distribution and storage of religious publications; and prohibits proselytism and other missionary activities.

Various provisions of the law on countering violent extremism deal with individuals’ security, protection of society and the state, preservation of constitutional order and the territorial integrity of the country, keeping the peace, and multiethnic and multireligious harmony. The law provides a framework of basic concepts, principles, and directions for countering extremism and extremist activities. By law, extremism is defined as the “expression of extreme forms of actions, focused on destabilizing social and political situations, a violent change in the constitutional order in Uzbekistan, a violent seizure of power and usurping its authority, [and] inciting national, ethnic or religious hatred.”

According to regulations, a website or blog may be blocked for calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order and territorial integrity of the country; spreading ideas of war, violence, and terrorism, as well as religious extremism, separatism, and fundamentalism; disclosing information that is a state secret or protected by law; or disseminating information that could lead to national, ethnic, or religious enmity or involves pornography or promoting narcotic usage. According to the Ministry of Justice, the government may block websites or blogs without a court order.

Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal. The criminal code distinguishes between “illegal” groups, which are unregistered groups, and “prohibited” groups viewed as “extremist.” It criminalizes membership in organizations banned as terrorist groups. It is a criminal offense punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of four to eight million som (\$380-\$760) to organize or participate in an illegal religious group. The law also specifically prohibits persuading others to join illegal religious groups, with penalties of up to three years in prison. The criminal code provides penalties of up to 20 years in prison for organizing or participating in the activities of religious extremist, fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups. Charges against alleged members of religious extremist groups may include the stated offenses of attempting to overthrow the constitutional order and terrorism.

By law, all religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice. The law states a religious group may carry out its activities only after the ministry registers it. The law lists a series of requirements, including having a permanent presence in eight of the country’s 14 administrative units for central registration; presenting a membership list of at least 100 citizens who are 18 or older; and providing a charter with a legal, physical address to the local Ministry of Justice branch.

Religious groups applying to register in a specific locality require the concurrence of the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), the local government (*khokimiyat*), and the neighborhood (*mahalla*) committee. Groups must submit “letters of guarantee” from the regional branches of the Ministry of Construction, the State Sanitary and Epidemiological Service, and the Department of the State Fire Safety Service under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The law requires notarized documents stating the leading founding members have the religious education necessary to preach their faith, the group’s sources of income, and CRA concurrence to register. The law also requires that *khokimiyats* concur with the registration of groups in their areas and that the group present notification from *khokimiyat* authorities stating the legal and postal addresses of the organization conform to all legal requirements, including obtaining authorization certificates from the main architectural division, sanitary-epidemiological services, fire services, and the local *mahalla* committee. After checking the submitted certificates, *khokimiyats* grant registration permission and send the documents to the CRA for review. By law, the Ministry of Justice may take one to three months to review a registration application and may approve or deny the registration or cease review without issuing a decision.

The law states registered religious groups may expand throughout the country by registering new locations, maintaining buildings compliant with fire and health codes, organizing religious teaching, and possessing religious literature.

The law limits the operations of a registered group to those areas where it is registered. The law grants only registered religious groups the right to establish schools and train clergy. Individual Muslim clergy members receive accreditation from the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan.

The CRA oversees registered religious activity. The Council for Confessions under the CRA includes ex officio representatives from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups. It discusses ways of ensuring compliance with the law, the rights and responsibilities of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion.

The government must approve religious activities outside of formal worship as well as religious activities intended for children younger than 16 without parental permission.

The law requires registered religious organizations to inform authorities 30 days in advance of holding religious meetings and other religious ceremonies at the group’s registered address(es). The administrative code requires all registered religious organizations to seek permission from local authorities and then inform the CRA and Ministry of Justice representative 30 days before holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies occurring outside of a group’s registered building(s), including activities involving foreign individuals or worshippers from another region. Unregistered groups are prohibited from organizing any religious activity.

The law punishes private entities for leasing premises or other property to, or facilitating gatherings, meetings, and street demonstrations of, religious groups without state permission. The law also criminalizes the unauthorized facilitation of children’s and youth meetings as well as literary and other study groups related to worship. The administrative penalty for violating these provisions ranges from fines of 9,215,000 to 18,430,000 som (\$880 to \$1,800) or up to 15 days’ imprisonment.

Under the law, state bodies, including *mahalla* committees, as well as nonstate and noncommercial public organizations have wide-ranging powers to combat suspected “antisocial activity” in cooperation with police. These powers include preventing the activity of unregistered religious organizations, ensuring compliance of rights of citizens with religious freedom, prohibiting propagation of religious views, and considering other questions related to observance of the law.

The law prohibits all individuals, except clergy and individuals serving in leadership positions of officially recognized religious organizations, from wearing religious attire in public places. The government does not generally enforce this section of law; individuals may appear in public places in religious attire, with the exception of schools at all levels, both public and private.

The law prohibits proselytizing and other missionary activities. The criminal code punishes proselytizing with up to three years in prison and proscribes efforts to draw minors into religious organizations without parental permission.

The law requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute religious materials. The law requires official approval of the content, production, and distribution and storage of religious publications. Such materials include books, magazines, newspapers, brochures, leaflets, audiovisual items including CDs and DVDs, and materials posted to the internet describing the origins, history, ideology, teachings, commentaries, and rituals of various religions of the world.

The administrative code punishes the “illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of materials of religious content” with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage (4,460,000 to 22,300,000 som, \$430 to \$2,100) for individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage (11,150,000 to 33,450,000 som, \$1,100 to \$3,200). The administrative code permits the confiscation of the materials and the “corresponding means of producing and distributing them.” Courts issue fines under the administrative code. In instances where an individual is unable to pay the fine, courts will issue an order garnishing wages. The criminal code imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage (22,300,000 to 44,600,000

son, \$2,100 to \$4,300) or “corrective labor” of up to three years for individuals who commit these acts subsequent to a judgment rendered under the administrative code. In practice, punishments under the criminal code for violations involving religious literature are rarely applied.

The state forbids banned “extremist religious groups” from distributing any type of publication. Individuals who distribute leaflets or literature deemed extremist via social networks are subject to criminal prosecution and face prison terms ranging from five to 20 years. According to the law, individuals in possession of literature by authors the government deems to be extremist or of any literature illegally imported or produced, are subject to arrest and prosecution.

The law provides for a commission, entitled The Special Commission for Preparation of Materials on Clemency, to review the prison profiles of convicts sentenced on charges of religious extremism. Another commission, The Commission on Clemency, reviews the petitions of persons who “mistakenly became members of banned organizations.” This commission may exonerate citizens from all criminal liability. Citizens are exempted from criminal liability if they have not undergone military training, participated in terrorism financing, or distributed information promoting terrorism.

The law prohibits private teaching of religion. It limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. Children may not receive religious education in public schools except for some classes providing basic information on world religions or “lessons of enlightenment” (the study of national culture) in the curriculum.

Religious education establishments acquire the right to operate after registering with the Ministry of Justice and receiving the appropriate license. Individuals teaching religious subjects at religious educational establishments must have a religious education recognized by the state and authorization to teach. These provisions make it illegal for laypersons to teach others any form of religion or for government-approved religious instructors to teach others outside the confines of an approved educational institution.

The law permits only religious groups with a registered central administrative body to train religious personnel and conduct religious instruction. Ten madrassahs, including one for women, and a Russian Orthodox and a Protestant seminary have official approval to train religious personnel and provide secondary education. The Cabinet of Ministers considers madrassah-granted diplomas equivalent to other diplomas, enabling madrassah graduates to continue to university-level education.

The law requires imams to have graduated from a recognized religious education facility and registered for a license with the government. The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan assigns a graduate to a particular mosque as a deputy imam before he may subsequently become an imam. According to government officials, clerics from various religious groups who obtained their qualifications abroad may officiate within licensed premises.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Throughout the year, the government consulted with international legal scholars regarding draft updates to the law on religion, and on August 6, it officially requested a joint opinion from the OSCE and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission. On October 12, the OSCE and the Venice Commission issued their opinion, stating that while the draft provided some improved protections, it also allowed the government to maintain strict and excessive control over religion and religious freedom. It also stated, “The Draft Law should be substantially revised in order to ensure its full compliance with international human rights standards and OSCE human dimension commitments.” In particular, it cited the mandatory registration of religious activity and religious organizations; unnecessary requirements for registration; the continuation of censorship on religious materials and bans on religious expression; excessive discretion by government officials that would allow for discrimination; and interference with a religious organization’s right to autonomy. At year’s end, the draft remained under discussion in parliament.

According to a prominent human rights defender, the draft law was not much different from the previous law because it “continues to ban all exercise of freedom of religion without state permission, bans teaching about religion without state permission, continues censorship by the government of all materials about religion, and bans the sharing of religion.”

NGO representatives said the government continued the severe physical abuse of persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of religious extremism or of participating in Islamic activity that was not sanctioned by the government. In February, media reported that NGO workers had submitted a complaint to the human rights ombudsman – who may investigate complaints from detainees and the public – regarding the abuse of religious prisoner Amirbek Khodzhaev, imprisoned in a penal colony in Navoi Region. According to Khodzhaev’s mother, authorities stripped him naked, placed him in a “butterfly” position with his hands behind his head at the neck and shoulder blades, then handcuffed and beat him. The NGO also reported officials abused prisoners during Ramadan, preventing them from fasting by forcibly pushing food in their mouths. According to the media report, the ombudsman’s office did not take the complaints seriously.

On January 8, Ibromkhim Kholmatov, who served a prison term from 2000 to 2002 for “association with Hizb ut-Tahrir,” was arrested at his home and later charged with aiding and abetting extremism. According to religious freedom activists, Kholmatov was subjected to “strong psychological pressure” by authorities and was not permitted to see his family. The family told activists that authorities provided little information about the charges against him and said they were not permitted to see him.

Civil society groups continued to express concern that the law’s definition of extremism remained too broad and failed to distinguish between nonviolent religious beliefs and ideologies supporting violence.

On May 28, the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced it had arrested several members of the banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir in the cities of Andijon and Namangan as well as in the Tashkent and Surkhandarya Regions. The ministry did not say how many persons were arrested but stated the individuals had previously served prison sentences for participating in the group’s activities and were continuing to spread extremist ideas after being released. The ministry said it seized literature containing extremist language and initiated a criminal investigation. The government did not provide information regarding the total number of persons convicted of engaging in terrorist and extremist activities or on persons belonging to what the government called religious fundamentalist organizations who were serving prison sentences. In 2018, the most recent year for which the government provided information, 1,503 prisoners remained in detention for these crimes. NGO representatives said they could not independently verify these numbers.

The government reported it did not arrest any citizens on religious grounds during the year. It said, however, that 18 criminal cases were filed against 38 persons on the basis of membership or participation in banned religious extremist activities. It also reported it had initiated 22 criminal cases regarding “smuggling of banned religious material.” Some religious freedom activists said that security services had fabricated the charges against the detainees to make a “show” of being tough on religious extremism. One prominent human rights lawyer stated that authorities based the charges on incoming messages to the detainees’ phones that were related to the banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir even though authorities knew the detainees themselves did not write or respond to the messages.

Religious activists reported many religious prisoners continued to face “extensions” of their sentences when prison officials brought new charges, accusing inmates of involvement in extremist groups or other crimes. The new charges resulted in new sentences, and many individuals whose original sentences had ended years before were consequently still imprisoned.

In five separate instances during the year, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev released or reduced the sentences of a total of 616 prisoners, 243 of whom had been detained on violations of the law on religion. In an August 1 government video announcing one of the planned releases, the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that 4,500 prisoners had been released or pardoned since the death of former President Islam Karimov in 2016, including 1,584 religious prisoners; of these, 1,215 were released and 369 received reduced sentences. Since the August 1 announcement, new releases on August 27 and December 7 brought the total number of religious prisoners released or receiving reduced sentences since 2016 to 1,710.

On November 27, blogger Tulkin Astanov, who in 2019 was sentenced to five years’ probation after posting online discussions about a wide range of religious themes, including calls to allow women to wear hijabs, men to grow beards, and children to pray in mosques, was rearrested, tried, and sentenced on the same day for breaking parole terms that restricted him from leaving Tashkent. His lawyer stated that an inspector with the Uchtepa police probation group summoned Astanov the morning of November 27, and his three-hour trial took place that evening. He was immediately sentenced to five years in prison by the Uchtepa District Criminal Court and transferred to a penal colony in Bukhara on December 1 or 2. His lawyer said Astanov had traveled to the Buvayda district of Fergana and Chinaz City (Sirdarya Region) during his probation period, breaking the terms of his previous parole, but Astanov’s family told the BBC Uzbek service they believed he was sentenced again for his activity promoting religious freedom. Following the sentencing, the Tashkent Department of Internal Affairs issued a statement saying, “He introduced himself as an advocate for victims of government agencies, persuaded them to provide defamatory and biased information about law enforcement, and posted the material on the internet.” The Tashkent City Criminal Court heard his appeal on December 22 but upheld the verdict.

According to a religious freedom activist, Rustambek Karimov, who was sentenced to three years in prison in 2019 alongside Astanov for posting religious-themed content online, continued to serve his sentence in a penal colony.

Local authorities closed popular blogger Adham Atajanov’s restaurant following his February meeting with the U.S. Secretary of State. Atajanov, whose pen name is “Abu Muslim,” reportedly used the earnings from his restaurant to produce online religious freedom content on his website Islamonline.uz and his Facebook page, which had almost 264,000 followers. Atajanov said that in the past, he had frequently criticized government policies on religious issues and had faced no repercussions or backlash. He said that immediately following his meeting with the Secretary, however, authorities shut off the gas to his restaurant, resulting in its closure. Authorities cited unpaid bills and other violations, despite evidence his bills were paid and he was in compliance with regulations. Gas service was eventually restored and the restaurant reopened, but Atajanov suffered significant financial loss as a result of the shutdown.

Other Islamic media platforms very similar to Atajanov’s remained active without government interference, including a private, well-known Muslim channel on YouTube (Azon.tv) with 268,000 subscribers, a private Facebook page with almost 110,000 followers (Azon), and the privately owned radio station, Azon.fm.

Media reported that on March 31, Alimardon Sultonov, a trauma surgeon at Ellikkala Central State Hospital in the northwestern Republic of Karakalpakstan, called the local medical emergency service to ask whether there were any COVID-19 cases in Karakalpakstan. Five local government officials then appeared at the hospital to question Sultonov, who was known for posting his views on Muslims’ freedom of religion and belief on social media. The officials asked Sultonov if he was in possession of religious texts, and he confirmed he had Islamic texts on his computer. Officials confiscated the computer and opened a criminal case against him, placing him under house arrest and charging him with spreading false information on COVID-19 lockdown measures. He was also charged with the “illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of religious literature.” On November 23, the Ellikalansky District Court in the Karakalpakstan Republic sentenced him to 14 months of house arrest, including time served. Sultonov filed an appeal, and a hearing was scheduled for January 7, 2021.

On August 14, media reported that the Tashkent City Criminal Court sentenced five Muslim men to up to 11.5 years in prison and restricted the movement (including limits on driving and participating in public gatherings as well as placing them under house arrest and requiring them to comply with curfews) of three other Muslim men who discussed their faith on social media. Prosecutors accused the eight men of downloading extremist sermons and other terrorism-related offenses.

On March 12 and April 29, the Supreme Court ruled in two instances that two websites (najot.info and hizb-uzbekiston.info) as well as 43 online profiles, channels, and pages on Facebook, YouTube, and the messaging app Telegram were promoting extremism. The court ruled that the materials and content of these sources were prohibited from entering or being manufactured, distributed, or possessed in the country.

The government continued to ban Islamic groups it defined as “extremist” and criminalized membership in such groups, which included 22 religious organizations. The government reported that at year’s end, the following organizations were defined as banned: Akramites, Islamic Movement of Turkestan, Islamic Jihad Group, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, al-Jihad, al-Qa’ida, World Jihad Foundation, Muslim Brothers, Zamiyati Islomi Tablig, Jamaat-e-Islami-i-Pakistan, Eastern Turkestan Liberation Organization, East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Boz Kurd, Abu Saif Group, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, Islamic State, Tavhid va Jihad, Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhariy, Jamaat-e-Ansarulloh, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jihadists, and Nurchists. The government stated its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism were not an infringement on religious freedom, but rather were a matter of preventing the overthrow of secular authorities and the incitement of interreligious instability and hatred.

According to media and the government, the ban on private religious instruction continued to result in the government’s detaining and fining members of religious communities. The ban included meetings of persons gathered to discuss their faith or to exchange religious ideas. Some Muslims said religious discussions continued to be considered taboo because no one wanted to risk punishment for “proselytism” or for teaching religious principles in private. The government reported that as of October 1, it had shut down 20 *hujras* (illegal private schools that provide Islamic education) and had found more than 50 persons “administratively liable” (fined them) for illegal religious education.

In July, the Samarkand Regional Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a press release reporting on the raid of an illegal hujra. According to the report, a man was illegally teaching recitations from the Quran to a group of seven students, ranging in age from nine to 17. Officers confiscated seven religious books and seven notebooks, all written in Arabic. The government did not report if any charges were filed.

Media reported that on March 4, police in Margilan, Fergana Region, raided the home of a retired public school teacher. Police confiscated from her and her female students Arabic-language Qurans and Islamic textbooks published in the country. Media did not report whether authorities filed any charges against them.

The government sometimes restricted access to websites, including those of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Forum 18. The government maintained a list of illegal websites it said were linked to Islamic extremist activity.

While the draft law on religion remained under parliamentary consideration, the government reported it had attempted to streamline the registration process for religious groups pending approval of the new law. Activists said, however, the government did not evenly apply the streamlined registration guidelines throughout the country, and that the CRA helped some religious groups obtain mahalla approval, but not others. The draft law on religion contained language removing the requirement for mahalla approval in the registration process, but the current law continued to require it.

According to the CRA, at year’s end, the country had 2,293 registered religious organizations representing 16 different faiths, compared with 2,280 registered religious organizations and 16 faiths in 2019. Muslim religious groups operated 2,071 Sunni mosques (compared with 2,065 in 2019), four Shia mosques, 15 Muftiates, and 13 education institutes. The 190 registered non-Muslim groups included 38 Orthodox churches (the same as in 2019), five Catholic churches, 60 Pentecostal churches (up from 56 in 2019), 24 Baptist churches, 10 Seventh-day Adventist churches (one more than in 2019), four New Apostol churches (one more than in 2019), two Lutheran churches, one Jehovah’s Witness Kingdom Hall, one Voice of God church, 27 Korean Protestant churches, two Armenian Apostolic churches, eight Jewish communities, six Baha’i centers, one Hari Krishna temple, and one Buddhist temple. The Bible Society of Uzbekistan was also registered.

During the year, the government registered eight churches, the same number as in 2019: the “Agape” Full Gospel Church in Tashkent on July 6; the New Apostolic Church in Fergana region on July 20; a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Samarkand on August 7; the “Hope” Full Gospel Church in Nukus on August 12; the “Salt of the Earth” Full Gospel Church in Almalyk on August 12; the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Church in Sirdarya on August 13; the “Light of Truth” Full Gospel Church in Gulistan on August 29; and Farovon Hayot (formerly Ahli Kitob) in Tashkent on November 16. In October, Shia Muslims in Bukhara submitted paperwork to register a Shia mosque in the city. According to religious groups, there were 17 known churches that still wished to register.

Many religious group representatives continued to report they were unable to meet the government’s registration requirements, especially the requirement for a permanent presence in eight of the country’s 14 administrative units to acquire central registration and the requirement that 100 members must apply for registration in a specific locality. They said their inability to register made them subject to harassment by local authorities and criminal sanction for engaging in “illegal” religious activities.

As in previous years, the Ministry of Justice explained denials of registration by citing failures of religious groups to report a valid legal address or to obtain guarantee letters and necessary permits from all local authorities (including the mahalla). Some groups stated they did not have addresses because they continued to be reluctant to purchase property without assurances the government would approve their registration application. Other groups stated local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members. In response, some groups reported providing congregation membership lists with only Russian-sounding surnames.

According to some Christian groups, many churches again attempted to register but remained unregistered at year’s end. In Tashkent, these included Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostal Life Water Church, Pentecostal Source of Life Church, and Pentecostal New Wave Church. Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Halls also remained unregistered in Urgench, Fergana, Bukhara, Samarkand, Nukus, and Karshi. The Pentecostal Full Gospel churches in the cities of Khanabad, Kungrad, Chimbay, Gulistan, and Jizzakh remained unregistered, along with two in the city of Nukus. Several religious freedom advocates said the majority of the Christian churches registered in the year were not ethnic Uzbek, but ones whose members were mostly of Russian or Korean ethnicity.

Jehovah’s Witnesses again stated that, because the government considered illegal any religious activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses outside of the one registered religious building in Chirchik, the group remained a potential target for harassment and mistreatment, although they stated no raids occurred during the year. Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives said the group’s one registered site in Chirchik did not adequately meet their needs because their numbers were growing. They also said the group had repeatedly attempted to register in seven districts of the country, but the government had rejected their application at the mahalla level, the first step in the registration process. Jehovah’s Witnesses filed a cessation appeal with the Supreme Court in 2019, which was denied on February 20 but not transmitted to the Jehovah’s Witnesses until October 5. On January 27, Jehovah’s Witnesses filed an appeal to the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding six of the seven cases of unsuccessful registrations. At year’s end, the UN Human Rights Committee had not responded.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported the Ministry of Justice, together with the State Tax Committee and the Ministry of Finance, conducted a special audit of the only registered Kingdom Hall, located in the city of Chirchik, from November 23 until December 11. Church representatives said one possible reason for the audit could have been the group’s charitable activities. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Chirchik said they had received \$24,000 from Jehovah’s Witnesses offices in New Zealand to help church members and their families with food and protective supplies. The church reported that it successfully helped approximately 600 persons in seven regions with the funds. Church representatives said the government audit concerned them and they believed officials were seeking a way to require reregistration of the church’s charter, which they said could lead to registration problems for their only legally registered location.

The Ministry of Education maintained a dress code regulating the length of hair and dress, the color of uniforms, and the type of shoes for all pupils in both public and private schools. The government continued to forbid any religious symbols, including skullcaps, crosses, and hijabs. Reportedly, however, one private school for girls allowed students to wear hijabs.

Religious freedom advocates stated that in the beginning of the year, there were reports that some schools and universities prevented the attendance of females wearing hijabs. In August, lawyer Abduvhid Yakubov filed a case with the Constitutional Court to annul a 2018 Cabinet of Ministers resolution that stated students should wear “modern uniforms,” stating the ruling was unconstitutional. School and university administrations used the 2018 resolution as the basis for banning hijabs. On September 16, the Constitutional Court dismissed Yakubov’s complaint, stating it was unfounded. Yakubov did not appeal the court’s decision.

Religious activist Fayzullaev Isakhon reported authorities arrested and charged him with the illegal distribution of religious information and held him for 10 days following a May 19 Facebook post critical of the local government in Fergana. The Regional Administrative Court of Fergana District stated the writings were those of Shuhrat Kayumov, a well-known, recently deceased journalist and “Honored Artist of Uzbekistan.” The writings were composed of religious material about the Prophet Mohammad that Kayumov had sent to his friend Isakhon via Telegram on March 29. During his detention, authorities forcibly shaved Isakhon, removing a beard he had worn for 20 years.

On September 24, media outlet *Podrobno.uz* reported a case in which a passerby filmed police harassing women wearing hijabs on Ghuncha Street in the Shaykhantakhur district of Tashkent. Police were recorded pushing women into a police bus. According to authorities, they were attempting to reduce the number of pedestrians who were not wearing masks. Observers told media, however, that police often monitored this neighborhood and frequently targeted men with long beards and women wearing hijabs.

According to the CRA and Muslim religious leaders, the government continued to review the content of imams’ sermons as well as the volume and substance of Islamic materials published by the Muftiate. Religious leaders said the government ensured its control over the Muftiate through the CRA by selecting the Muftiate’s staff and circulating approved sermons for prayer services. The government did not legally limit the volume of public calls to prayer, although many mosques voluntarily did so, according to media sources.

In February, President Mirziyoyev issued a decree establishing the Ministry for the Support of the Mahalla and the Family. The new ministry was tasked with ensuring close cooperation between state-level governments and local mahallas on issues of women, family, and social structures, thereby more formally linking the government and mahalla actions, including those involving religious matters.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports from minority religious groups that children were prevented from attending community-sponsored activities, including Sunday school, and services with the permission of their parents. On August 2, the Ministry of Interior publicly clarified that minors could attend mosque to pray when accompanied by their parents, siblings, and other close relatives after restrictions on general worship imposed as a result of the coronavirus outbreak were lifted. Previously, there had been a de facto ban, first enforced under the country’s late first President, Islam Karimov, according to al-Jazeera Television.

According to anecdotal reports, a small number of unregistered “neighborhood mosques” continued to function for use primarily by elderly or disabled persons who did not live close to larger, registered mosques. The neighborhood mosques remained limited in their functions and were not assigned registered imams.

Non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious groups said they continued to experience particular difficulties conducting religious activities in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan because most non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities continued to lack legal status in the region. With the addition of a newly registered Pentecostal church, there were two Christian churches in a region of two million persons, the other belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church.

In August, media reported the historic Ashkenazi Jewish Synagogue Beth Menachem in Tashkent was in danger of being demolished. A real estate developer had sued the synagogue, wanting to build a multistory building on its site. After the Jewish community publicized the case, the government stepped in to assist; on August 5, the Tashkent Interdistrict Economic Court ruled in favor of the synagogue, and the developer dropped its suit during the hearing. The CRA published a statement from Jewish community leader in Tashkent Arkadiy Isakharov in which he thanked the Tashkent khokimiyat and the CRA for their assistance in resolving the matter.

According to Christian religious leaders, many Christians, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, remained separated from an authorized gathering place by more than 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) and gathered in private “house churches,” leaving them potentially vulnerable to police harassment and abuse because such gatherings remained illegal.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports from religious leaders or activists of authorities filming participants of religious services.

Unlike in previous years, Catholic Church leaders did not report surveillance of Catholic masses.

The government stated that prisoners had the right to practice any religion or no religion. According to human rights activists, including a prominent former religious prisoner and current human rights defender, some prisoners continued to tell family members they were not able to observe religious rituals conflicting with the prison’s schedule of activities. Such observances included traditional Islamic morning prayers. While some activists reported this situation had improved, others said it had not. According to human rights activists, authorities forbade all prisoners from observing religious holidays, such as Ramadan, including by fasting. Although some prison libraries provided copies of the Quran and the Bible, family members continued to state that authorities did not allow some religiously observant prisoners access to religious materials.

The government continued to limit access to Islamic publications deemed extremist and arrested individuals attempting to import or publish religious literature without official permission. There were no reports the government entered the homes of members of any religious group in search of illegal religious material.

The government continued to control access to Islamic publications and to require a statement in every domestic publication indicating the source of its publication authority. According to marketplace shoppers, it remained possible, although uncommon, to obtain a few imported works in Arabic from book dealers in secondhand stores or flea markets, but any literature not specifically approved by the CRA was rare.

According to the CRA, it continued to block the importation of some Christian and Islamic literature.

Throughout the year, religious activist Adham Atajanov (pen name Abu Muslim) reported the CRA had not responded to his repeated requests for official review and permission to publish his interpretations of five books on Islam. In October, Atajanov said he had received permission to publish two of the books, with three remaining under consideration.

The government continued to allow only the following groups to publish, import, and distribute religious literature upon review and approval by the CRA: the Bible Society of Uzbekistan, the Muftiate, the Tashkent Islamic Institute, and the offices of the Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Catholic Churches.

The Bible Society of Uzbekistan reported that during the year, Christians could easily request a Bible from them in three languages, English, Russian, and Uzbek, and that Christians were no longer required to fill out paperwork to obtain a Bible.

During the year, the government-controlled Muftiate continued to operate a call center created in 2019 and staffed by religious experts, which allowed citizens to call in and ask general questions pertaining to Islam.

The government continued to fund an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. The government prohibited Islamic religious institutions from receiving private funding other than for construction and repairs. While the government allowed some private funding, it did not permit funding from foreign governments. The International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, established in 2018, continued to provide the country’s religious education institutions (universities and madrassahs) with academic experts, teachers, and mentors. It also worked to improve the research and professional skills of scholars; educate graduate students in the fields of Quranic studies, Islamic law, the science of hadith, and *kalam* (Islamic doctrine); and engage in research, teaching, and public outreach. The government reported that 1,692 persons were studying at the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan. Of these, 1,462 students were pursuing a bachelor’s degree, 187 a master’s degree, and 43 a doctoral degree.

The government continued to prohibit separate training of Shia imams inside the country and did not recognize training received outside the country.

At year’s end, there were three public Islamic training academies to prepare clerics in the country: the Tashkent Islamic Institute, Samarkand Higher School of Hadith Studies, and Mir-i-Arab Madrassah in Bukhara. The number of madrassahs for secondary education increased from nine to 10 after a new one opened in the Surkhandarya Region. Additionally, two Christian seminaries continued to function. According to official figures, 2,299 persons were studying at the Islamic universities and madrassahs (compared with 1,984 in 2019), 50 at the Orthodox seminary (compared with 41 in 2019), and 12 at the Protestant seminary (compared with 20 in 2019). Sources reported that COVID-19 restrictions reduced enrollment, particularly of international students from the region.

Umrah regulations also required pilgrims to apply to local mahalla committees, which submit a list to the khokimiyats. The CRA used the khokimiyats’ lists to coordinate national air carrier flights to Jeddah. Between January and February, before COVID lockdowns went into effect, 28,000 pilgrims traveled for the Umrah, compared with 21,419 in 2019.

Large, government-operated hotels continued to furnish a limited number of rooms with Qurans and Bibles. The government did not report how many Qurans were made available for hotels. Upon advance request, hotels also provided other holy books, prayer mats, and *qiblas*, used by Muslims to indicate the direction of Mecca. Many airports and train stations maintained small prayer rooms on their premises.

Civil society observers and religious freedom activists continued to report that authorities allowed Muslims to celebrate Ramadan openly, but they said COVID-19 restrictions affected the number of public iftars, and authorities urged citizens to celebrate the holiday at home.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Activists and human rights groups continued to report social pressure among the majority Muslim population against conversion from Islam. Religious community members said ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity risked harassment and discrimination. Some said social stigma for conversion from Islam resulted in difficulties in carrying out burials and that Muslims in the community forced them to bury individuals in distant cemeteries or allowed burials only with Islamic religious rites.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of individuals being attacked or harassed for their conversion to a minority faith.

Members of religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, continued to state they faced societal scrutiny and discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On February 2, the Secretary of State met with religious leaders representing Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities to solicit their views on the state of religious freedom in the country. In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officials and senior officials from the

Department of State, including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, raised religious freedom concerns with the country’s leadership. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials met with multiple senior government officials, including the President, Foreign Minister, and officials from the National Human Rights Center and the CRA, and raised concerns about the ability of children to attend mosques with their parents, imprisonment and mistreatment of individuals for their religious beliefs, the draft law on religion, and bureaucratic impediments to the registration of religious minority groups. The embassy used social media to raise issues of concern but also to highlight achievements, such as the country’s removal from the Special Watch List and the government’s public clarification that minors could attend mosque if accompanied by their parents.

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom held a series of engagements with the Foreign Minister and the Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the United States, raising the status of the country’s draft religion law and of the registration of religious organizations and places of worship, as well as the need for the government to allow children to participate in religious activities and to release individuals charged and detained for exercising their faith peacefully. Religious freedom issues were also on the agenda for the annual bilateral consultations, held on November 20, with the main topics being the draft law on religion, continuing the registration of religious organizations (including Jehovah’s Witnesses), and the number of religious prisoners still imprisoned by the government. Several Department of State senior officials, including the Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia, also raised religious freedom points in their meetings.

At various levels of government and in different forums, U.S. officials continued to urge the government to amend the religion law to allow members of religious groups to practice their faiths freely outside registered houses of worship and to relax requirements for registering faith-based organizations. They continued to press the government to provide protection for public discourse on religion and remove restrictions on the importation and use of religious literature, in both hardcopy and electronic versions. They also raised the difficulties religious groups and faith-based foreign aid organizations faced with registration and with authorities’ limiting their access to religious literature. The U.S. government supported the implementation of the country’s religious freedom roadmap and the drafting of legislation overhauling the law on religion as concrete steps to enhance religious freedom. The U.S. government urged the government of Uzbekistan to seek a joint opinion on the draft law on religion from the OSCE and Venice Commission.

Embassy representatives frequently discussed individual religious freedom cases with foreign diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring court cases.

Throughout the year, and despite COVID-19 restrictions, embassy officials maintained contact with religious groups, human rights activists, and other civil society representatives to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Topics included the registration of minority religious groups, religious education for children, and concerns about the wearing of hijabs and beards for Muslims.

In its public outreach and private meetings, the embassy again drew attention to the continuing inability of certain Christian groups to register houses of worship, of evangelical Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses to discuss their beliefs openly in public, and of Muslim parents to take their children to mosque or educate them in their faith. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials continued to meet with representatives of religious groups and civil society and with relatives of prisoners to discuss freedom of conscience and belief. Embassy engagement included meetings with virtually all major religious denominations in the country, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptist groups, Jewish leaders, Muslim scholars, and religious freedom activists.

On December 2, 2020, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State removed Uzbekistan from the Special Watch List, determining that it no longer engaged in or tolerated “severe violations of religious freedom.” Uzbekistan had previously been designated as a Country of Particular Concern from 2006 to 2017 and was moved to a Special Watch List in 2018 and 2019.

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Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum
Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

[T \(Telephone\)](tel:+43158900583) +43 1 589 00 583

[F \(Fax\)](tel:+43158900583) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

Contact

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