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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Uzbekistan

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws provide for religious freedom; however, other laws and policies restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these restrictions. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward improvement in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The law restricts the religious freedom of unregistered groups and prohibits many activities, such as proselytizing; many members of minority religious groups faced heavy fines and short jail terms for violations of these laws. The government continued to deal harshly with Muslims who discussed religious issues outside of sanctioned mosques. However, the government did not interfere with worshippers at sanctioned mosques and permitted the regular operation of religious groups traditionally practicing in the country, including the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Russian Orthodox communities.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, society generally was tolerant of religious groups, and religious groups were generally tolerant of each other.

U.S. government representatives engaged with the government on religious freedom as part of a broader dialogue on respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Embassy officials met with representatives of religious communities, civil society, and government bodies, as well as relatives of prisoners, to discuss freedom of conscience and belief. The U.S. ambassador hosted an iftar dinner (an evening meal during Ramadan) for representatives of a number of religions. The secretary of state redesignated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act on August 18, for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The government reported that approximately 93 percent of the population is nominally Muslim (the vast majority are Sunni, of the Hanafi school (madhab), and approximately 1 percent are Shia, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand). Approximately 4 percent is Russian Orthodox, a percentage that is declining as ethnic Russians and other Slavs continue to emigrate. The remaining 3 percent includes small communities of Roman Catholics, Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, Hare Krishnas, and atheists. In addition, an estimated 10,500-11,500 Ashkenazi and Bukharan Jews remain concentrated in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley.

At year's end, there were 2,224 registered religious organizations from 16 religious denominations, including 2,051 Islamic organizations (including mosques, educational institutions, and Islamic centers). Among the Muslim groups were several Shia congregations. Registered minority religious groups include 52 Korean Christian, 38 Russian Orthodox, 23 Baptist, 21 Pentecostal ("Full Gospel"), 10 Seventh-day Adventist, eight Jewish, five Catholic, six Baha'i, two Lutheran, four "New Apostolic," two Armenian Apostolic, one Jehovah's Witnesses, one Krishna Consciousness, one Temple of Buddha, one Christian "Voice of God" Church, and one interconfessional Bible Society.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for religious freedom; however, other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The constitution also establishes the principle of separation of church and state. The government prohibits religious groups from forming political parties and social movements.

The law provides for freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution, separation of church and state, and the right to establish schools and train clergy; however, the law grants those rights only to registered groups. It also restricts religious rights that it judges to be in conflict with national security, prohibits proselytizing, bans religious subjects in public schools, prohibits the private teaching of religious principles, and requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), a government agency accountable to the Cabinet of Ministers, must approve all religious literature. The Council for Confessions, under the CRA, discusses ensuring compliance with the law, the rights of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion. The committee includes representatives from various Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups.

Although the law treats all centrally registered religious denominations equally, the government funds an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. The government provided logistical support, including charter flights, for selected Muslims to participate in the Umrah and the Hajj pilgrimages, but pilgrims paid their own expenses. The government controls the muftiate, which in turn controls the Muslim hierarchy, the content of imams' sermons, and the volume and substance of published Islamic materials.

The law requires all religious groups to register and provides strict and burdensome criteria for registration. Among its requirements, the law stipulates that each group must present a list of at least 100 citizens ages 18 or older to the local branch of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). The CRA oversees registered religious activity.

The criminal and administrative codes contain severe penalties for violating the law and other statutes on religious activities. In addition to the prohibited activities that include organizing an illegal religious group, the law also proscribes persuading others to join such groups and efforts to draw minors into religious organizations without the permission of their parents. Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal.

The criminal code formally distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are those that are not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups viewed as extremist, which the government bans altogether. The code makes it a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison, to organize an illegal religious group or to resume the activities of such a group after it has been denied registration or ordered to disband. In addition the code punishes participation in such a group with up to three years in prison. The code also 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.

The law increases the fines for repeat violations of the law on religious activity up to 200 to 300 times the minimum monthly salary of 62,920 soums (\$35). After a person is punished under the administrative code, he or she may be tried under the criminal code for a repeat offense.

The law punishes "illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of materials of religious content" with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly salary for individuals or 50 to 100 times the minimum monthly salary for officials of organizations, together with confiscation of the materials and the "corresponding means of producing and distributing them." The criminal code also imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly salary or corrective labor of up to three years.

The law prohibits religious groups from training religious personnel if the group does not have a registered central administrative body. Registration of a central body requires registered religious groups to be present in eight of the 14 provinces (including Karakalpakstan and Tashkent City). There are six entities that legally may train religious personnel. The law limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. The law permits no private religious instruction and imposes fines for violations. The law also prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools. Article 14 of the religion law prohibits the wearing of "cult robes" (religious clothing) in public places by all except those serving in religious organizations.

The government allows those who object to military service on the basis of their religious beliefs, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, to perform alternate service.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Kurbon Hayit (Eid al-Adha) and Roza Hayit (Eid al-Fitr).

Government Practices

There were continued reports of abuses of religious freedom, including religious prisoners and detainees. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the year.

The government continued to commit serious abuses of religious freedom in its campaign against groups it broadly deemed extremist or those allegedly participating in underground Islamic activity. In many cases, authorities severely mistreated persons arrested on suspicion of religious extremism, using torture, beatings, and harsh prison conditions.

Family members of prisoners reported deaths in custody of prisoners serving sentences on charges related to religious extremism. In a typical case, family members reported that the body of the prisoner showed signs of beating or other abuse, but authorities pressured them to bury the body before a medical professional could examine it. Reported cases that fit this pattern during the year included the deaths of Abdumannon Ortiqov in June and Ulugbek Gaforov and Abdulfattoh Raimokhunov in January.

There were numerous reports of beatings and mistreatment of prisoners serving sentences for religious convictions. For example, the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) reported in October that relatives of Rustam and Dilshodbek Amanturdiyev, convicted of crimes reportedly committed as members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, alleged that prison officials at facilities in Navoi and Olmalik subjected the brothers to torture and other inhuman treatment. As in the past, reports indicated that prison administrators charged prisoners convicted of religious extremism with organizing extremist cells within prison or for other offenses that led to extended prison terms. Similarly, prisoners who would otherwise be eligible to apply for amnesty often were charged with internal prison violations, rendering them ineligible to apply. However, an Andijon-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported that during the year approximately 20 religious prisoners were released in Andijon, including eight (four men and four women) in November and December.

Reports from NGOs that monitor religious freedom indicated that the government imprisoned a significant number of individuals for membership in prohibited Muslim groups. For example, on February 3, the Qashqadaryo Region Court sentenced 13 residents of Kaptarli mahalla (a traditional neighborhood) in Nishon District, including the imam at the local mosque, Abduhalil Toshpulatov, to between six and 10 years in prison on charges connected with membership in the banned Jihadisti (Jihodchilar) group.

Family members of prisoners convicted on charges related to religious extremism reported that prisoners often were not allowed to read the Qur'an or pray privately.

While most prisons reportedly had special areas set aside for inmates to pray and prison libraries had copies of the Qur'an and the Bible, there were reports that prison authorities did not allow some prisoners suspected of Islamic extremism to practice their religion freely. Restrictions included not permitting inmates to pray five times a day or refusing to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast. There were also reports that authorities punished prisoners for "violating internal prison regulations" by praying at certain times of the day.

Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization was illegal. There were numerous reported instances of armed law enforcement officers raiding meetings of unregistered congregations and detaining their members. With a few exceptions, authorities charged those detained with unauthorized religious activity, such as worshipping, teaching, proselytizing, or possessing unauthorized religious material, and imposed administrative fines. For example, on July 28, the Gulistan municipal criminal court convicted nine members of an unregistered Baptist church in Gulistan of unregistered religious activity and illegal teaching of religion and issued fines ranging from 50,000 to 5 million soum (\$28-\$2,800). Higher courts in Gulistan and Sirdaryo Province confirmed the rulings on appeal in August and November, respectively. As in previous years, several individuals were imprisoned for such offenses, including three Protestants sentenced to 15 days in jail in February.

There also were cases in which authorities sanctioned representatives of registered religious organizations. For example, in August the Nurabad district criminal court in Samarkand Province fined Shoirra Allayarova, a member of the local evangelical Christian Baptist church, 57,200 soum (\$32) for "violating the rules on religious teaching."

There were several cases of persons being arrested or convicted for membership in religious groups labeled extremist by the government. For example, the IGIHRDU reported in November that the Upper Chirchik criminal court in Tashkent Province convicted 16 residents of Yangiyol District of membership in extremist groups. Fifteen of the defendants, all of whom were arrested from June through August, received six-year sentences, while the alleged head of the group, Habibulla Erkabaev, received 12 years. By IGIHRDU count, more than 40 Yangiyol residents were arrested and convicted of "religious extremism" between September and November.

There were no developments reported in the January 2010 arrest of 40 alleged Nur members in Bukhara and the arrest of 25 military personnel for Nur membership, 12 of whom faced courts martial, as reported by the NGO Forum 18, or the May 2010 arrest of eight women in the Fergana Valley for distributing books allegedly promoting religious extremism.

There also were no developments in the case of popular soccer journalist and religious commentator Hayrulla Khamidov, who was sentenced in May 2010 by a Tashkent court to six years in prison for being a "jihadist" and for illegal distribution of materials that threaten the public order.

The government continued to pursue the extradition of suspected religious extremists from other countries, particularly from Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Ukraine, including those who had sought asylum.

In March a court in the Russian city of Novosibirsk ruled against the country's request for the extradition of suspected Nur member Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov, who was arrested by Russian authorities in August 2010.

In August trials began of approximately 10 individuals extradited to the country by Kazakhstan in June on charges of involvement in a 2008 attack on Tashkent Imam Anvar Qori Tursunov, as well as participation in the banned Jihodchilar religious group. According to the domestic NGOs Ezgulik and IGIHRDU, courts in Sirdaryo, Surkhandaryo, and Tashkent provinces sentenced Kobiljon Kurbanov, Fayzullakhon Akbarov, and Akhmad Boltaev to four, five, and 13 years in prison, respectively.

Members of minority religious groups were sentenced to five to 15-day jail terms under the administrative code following unsanctioned searches of homes and offices. For example, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses reported at least eight such instances throughout the year. Others were assessed heavy fines. Forum 18 reported on five such cases in January and February.

Raids against unregistered church gatherings and social gatherings of those belonging to registered churches continued. For example, on July 29 police reportedly disrupted a picnic in the village of Niyazbash in Yangiyol District of Tashkent Province involving a group of 28 members of a registered evangelical Christian Baptist church. On November 21 the Yangiyol district criminal court found the group's pastor, Sergey Kozin, guilty under Article 202 of the administrative code (inducing participation in the activities of illegal non-state, non-commercial organizations, movements, or sects) and fined him almost four million soum (\$2,200). The Tashkent Region criminal court upheld the ruling on appeal.

Authorities fined several persons illegally possessing or distributing religious materials. For example, in August the Hamza district court in Tashkent fined Albina Bankova 2.5 million soum (\$1,400) and ordered the destruction of 300 Christian books, including five copies of the Bible, six copies of the Gospels, and 17 copies of the New Covenant, as well as 125 CDs and DVDs. The Tashkent municipal criminal court upheld the ruling on appeal on September 5.

Authorities also brought charges in at least one case in which the CRA reportedly had approved the religious materials in question. On September 13, authorities in Fergana Province charged Murodiljon Umurzakov under Article 244/3 of the criminal code (illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of religious materials). The charges stemmed from a police raid carried out on July 23, reportedly on the basis of a complaint from local citizens, during which authorities seized four books, including a

Bible and a Russian-language Qur'an. There was no further information concerning the case as of year's end.

Unlike in past years, there were no reports that authorities deported or canceled the visas of members of religious minority groups due to their suspected religious activities or affiliation. However, reliable nongovernmental contacts reported that officials with the Mirzo-Ulugbek District police station in Tashkent failed to issue an exit visa to Bahodir Avazov, the leader of a local Christian group, although the law requires a decision be taken within 15 days.

Unlike past years, there were no reports that officials threatened lawyers with loss of their licenses for representing defendants accused of charges related to religion.

The government generally enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom. By continuing to deny registration to some religious groups, the government effectively deprived their members of their legal right to worship, as provided for in the constitution. The government restricted many religious practices and activities, punishing some citizens because they engaged in religious practices in violation of registration laws.

The government bans Islamic organizations it broadly deems extremist and criminalizes membership in them, including Akromiya, Tablighi Jamaat, and Hizb-ut-Tahrir. In practice Nur, founded by Kurdish Mullah Said Nursi and associated with the religious teachings of Turkish scholar Fethullah Gullen, also is considered a banned organization, despite its consistent condemnations of violent extremism. The government states that it does not consider repression of persons or groups suspected of extremism to be a matter of religious freedom, but rather of preventing armed resistance to the government.

The government has repressed and prosecuted members of Akromiya (Akromiylar), an informal association that promotes business according to Islamic principles, since 1997. During the year, the Khorezm-based NGO Najot reported on the June 15 arrest and October 5 sentencing to eight years in prison of 33-year-old Anvar Rakhmanov on extremism charges related to membership in Akromiya. The government-controlled media continued to publish negative personal attacks against the group and its members. The government claims that the group attempted to overthrow the government through armed rebellion in Andijon in 2005.

Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim missionary group with origins in South Asia, describes itself as exclusively religious and apolitical. The government, however, continued to ban the

group. There were no reported cases against alleged members of Tablighi Jamaat during the year.

The government remained deeply suspicious of Muslims who worship outside state-approved institutions, were educated at madrassahs abroad, gather socially to discuss religious issues, or are tied to known "Wahhabi" imams, a term the government and the press periodically use to describe Muslims whose intellectual or religious roots derive from the strict teachings of prominent imams of the early 1990s.

The government formally bans as extremist eight lesser-known religiously based organizations. The government often accuses defendants of being "jihadists," but it is not clear whether the government considers them members of the terrorist Islamic Jihad Union or whether the government used the term generically to mean "extremist." The government informally bans other "extremist" Muslim religious groups as it identifies them, and defendants are convicted of sentences similar to those levied against groups previously identified as "jihadist" or "extremist."

There were credible reports that security services continued covert surveillance of religious communities. Authorities raided several gatherings of both registered and unregistered Christian groups. Additionally, observers noted persons with cameras filming participants in Friday prayer services at local mosques. Mosques often installed cameras, citing security concerns, but nongovernmental groups alleged these cameras also were used for surveillance purposes.

Sources reported that the government instructed mahalla committees and imams to identify local residents who could potentially become involved in extremist activity or groups, including those who prayed daily or otherwise demonstrated active devotion. The government controlled the content of imams' sermons and the volume and content of published Islamic materials.

The government and local imams discouraged some public displays of religion. For example, in some parts of the country, authorities questioned women wearing the hijab and encouraged them either to remove it or alter it to reflect the more traditional style of tying the scarf at the back of the neck. Ezgulik reported in October that a court in Sirdaryo Province fined Manzura Kattakhujaeva 286,000 soum (\$159) for violating provisions in the administrative code that forbid wearing religious clothing in public. Ezgulik, as well as civil society activists, insisted that Kattakhujaeva was wearing the traditional Uzbek headscarf (ro'mol) as opposed to a hijab and called on authorities to issue clear guidance about the difference between religious and secular clothing.

Reports suggested that only imams selected from a government-approved list may be invited to give sermons at receptions for weddings and other social occasions. In the name of security, authorities continued to closely observe social gatherings where religious issues were discussed, particularly among men, with several arrests based on participation in such discussions. Sources reported that for this reason, Muslims became more reluctant to discuss religion outside of the mosque.

Children continued to be discouraged from practicing religion. School officials were known to discourage both Muslim and Christian parents from sending their children to mosque or church services, and some school officials questioned students about their religions and why they attended services. There were several reports of school officials sending girls home or rebuking them for wearing the hijab, and there were isolated reports of schools refusing to allow children to enter if their mothers' hijabs were not removed or altered. There continued to be reports that local officials pressured imams to prevent children from attending Friday prayers and additional reports that some local officials, teachers, and police officers turned students away from Friday prayer services. According to reports from individuals present at the meeting, Saidibragim Sainazarov, the deputy hokim (mayor) of Angren, conducted a meeting on November 2 during which he demanded that all religious communities in the city – Muslims, Russian Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christian Baptists, and the unregistered Catholic Church – permit minors to attend services only with their parents.

The government did not deregister any religious organizations.

After facing difficulties gaining registration in previous years, no mosques were known to have applied for registration during the year. A small number of unregistered "neighborhood mosques" still functioned in some areas for use primarily by elderly or disabled persons who did not live in close proximity to larger, registered mosques. The neighborhood mosques were limited in their functions, and registered imams were not assigned to them.

Minority religious groups continued to have difficulties registering during the year. Since 1996 the government has denied or left pending Jehovah's Witnesses applications to register congregations in Tashkent at least 23 times and to register congregations in the provinces 13 times. Of the several Jehovah's Witnesses groups in the country, only the one in Chirchik had registered status at year's end.

No Baptist church has successfully registered since 1999, and since 2000 four Baptist churches have lost their registered status. Baptist Union churches in Gulistan in Sirdaryo Province and in Gazalkent, Krasnogorsk, and Toy Tepa in Tashkent Province attempted to register several times in the past few years without success.

Other churches remained unregistered after unsuccessful past registration attempts, according to reports available at year's end. These included Bethany Baptist Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek District of Tashkent; the Pentecostal Church in Chirchik; Roman Catholic churches in Navoi and Angren; Emmanuel Church and Mir (Peace) Church of Nukus, Karakalpakstan; Hushkhabar Church in Gulistan; the Pentecostal church in Andijon; and the Adventist Church, Greater Grace Christian Church, Central Protestant Church, and Miral Protestant Church, all in Samarkand. Other congregations did not face similar difficulties.

Religious activity remained particularly difficult in Karakalpakstan, as no non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities had official registration status. The last registered Protestant church in Karakalpakstan, Emmanuel Pentecostal Church, lost its registration in 2005. More than 20 Protestant and Jehovah's Witnesses congregations in the region have been refused legal status, making their activity illegal.

During the year, some churches, particularly evangelical churches with ethnic Uzbek members, did not apply or reapply for registration because they expected local officials would not register them. Other groups, including those with too few members, reported that they preferred to avoid bringing themselves to the attention of authorities by submitting a registration application that obviously would not meet legal requirements. Some groups did not want to give the authorities a list of member names, especially ethnic Uzbek members, as they were harassed during previous attempts to register. A few groups refused on principle to seek registration because they challenge the government's right to require it.

In order to register, a group must report in its charter a valid legal address. In previous years, local officials denied approval of legal addresses or did not answer approval requests, thus preventing religious groups from registering. The MOJ also cited this requirement in explaining local officials' decisions. Some groups were reluctant to purchase property without assurance that their registration would be approved. Others claimed that local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members.

Other problems that prevented registration included claims of falsified congregation lists; problems certifying addresses; improper certification by fire inspectors, sanitation workers, and epidemiologists; grammatical errors in the text of a group's charter; and other technicalities.

Local officials and representatives of the religious establishment continued to express apprehension over the proselytizing activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. NGOs accused by the government of proselytizing remained closed, along with most other foreign NGOs. A

2003 Cabinet of Ministers decree restricts the activities of faith-based NGOs, and the law prohibits "actions aimed at converting believers of one religion into another (proselytizing) as well as any other missionary activity." The MOJ controls accreditation, a necessity for any foreigner attempting to work for an NGO.

State-controlled and state-influenced media in some cases encouraged prejudice against certain minority religious groups. During the year, as in the past, such media accused missionaries of posing a danger to society and sowing civil discord. For example, on October 20 Darakchi published an article about missionaries entitled "Unwanted Guests." On November 21, the state-run Yoshlar TV station broadcast a "documentary" entitled "Jehovah's Witnesses: The Art of Conversion into Zombies," which called on citizens to be vigilant and quoted an MOJ official as stating that Jehovah's Witnesses were engaged in illegal activities in localities where the organization is not registered.

Although the government requires that the CRA approve all religious literature, in practice a number of other government entities, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, National Security Service, Customs Service, and local police suppressed or confiscated religious literature. The government confiscated, and in some cases destroyed, illegally imported religious literature, as well as the equipment used to reproduce it. The Qishloq Hayoti newspaper reported on August 18 that customs officials, in cooperation with other law-enforcement bodies, seized more than 4,000 pieces of printed, audio, video, and other electronic forms of religious literature during the first seven months of the year.

The law restricts the right to publish, import, and distribute religious literature solely to registered central offices of religious organizations. Eight of these exist: the Bible Society of Uzbekistan (BSU); the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan; Tashkent Islamic University; Tashkent Islamic Institute; and Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic offices. There was no new information available concerning ongoing attempts by the BSU and Jehovah's Witnesses to gain approval for imported religious literature held by the government or the BSU's attempt to gain approval to publish locally one book of the Bible in the Uzbek language.

Authorities also confiscated, and in some cases destroyed, Christian literature in Uzbek and Russian that was imported legally. For historical and cultural reasons, evangelical pastors generally preach in Russian while offering limited services in Uzbek, the official national language and the one linked most closely to the majority Muslim population.

The International Post Office (IPO) in Tashkent continued to scrutinize all incoming packages and send examples of any religious material to the CRA for further examination and approval. When the CRA bans the materials, it mails a letter to the intended

recipient and the sender explaining the rejection. The CRA has denied entry for both Christian and Islamic titles. For example, in September customs officials at the IPO interdicted and sent to the CRA for analysis 23 copies of an item of Christian literature entitled "Christ-Our Sanctification," which was sent from Kazakhstan to Nadezhda Matyukhina, an 86-year-old member of the evangelical Christian Baptist community. The CRA issued a decision on September 28 which stated that importing this literature into the country was forbidden.

The government tightly controlled access to Islamic publications and required a statement in every domestic publication (books, pamphlets, compact discs, and movies) indicating the source of its publication authority. Many books were published with the phrase "permission for this book was granted by the CRA," or "this book is recommended by the CRA," indicating official sanction. Generally, books published under the Muslim Board's imprint (known as "Movarounnahr") contained these phrases, as did other religious works published under the imprint of the state-owned Sharq and Tashkent Islamic University Publishing Houses. A few imported works in Arabic occasionally were available from book dealers. More controversial literature generally was not available in the marketplace. Possession of literature by authors deemed to be extremists, or of any literature illegally imported or produced, may lead to arrest and prosecution. The government categorically prohibited Nur and other literature it deemed "extremist."

The government blocked access to several Web sites that contained religious content, including Christian and Islamic-related news.

The private teaching of religious principles and the teaching of religion to minors without parental consent is illegal. Only a religious group with a registered central office may legally provide religious instruction.

Eleven madrassahs (including two for women) provide secondary education on a full range of secular subjects. The Cabinet of Ministers considers diplomas granted by madrassahs equivalent to other diplomas, enabling graduates of those institutions to continue their education at the university level. In addition, the Islamic Institute and Islamic University in Tashkent provide higher education religion programs, although the Islamic University in Tashkent is a secular institution. There is no other officially sanctioned religious instruction for individuals interested in learning about Islam. In response to strong demand, however, women's groups have been started at Tashkent Islamic University and the Islamic Institute, as well as at one men's madrassah in Qashqadaryo Province.

Due to increased government attention to unauthorized instruction in Islam, imams no longer informally offer religious education, a practice that, although technically illegal, local authorities sometimes allowed in the past.

The government restricts Shia Islamic education by not permitting the separate training of Shia imams inside the country and by not recognizing such education received outside the country. The Russian Orthodox Church operates two monasteries (one for women, one for men) and a seminary and offers Sunday school education through many of its churches. Other religious groups offer religious education through their religious centers. The Jewish community has no rabbinate because it does not have synagogues in eight different provinces and therefore cannot meet the requirements for a registered central office. It also has struggled to get a new rabbi appointed for an existing congregation. Ten synagogues continued to function (three in Tashkent, two in Samarkand, two in Bukhara, and one in each of Fergana, Kokand, and Andijon), but each was struggling for financial support. There is a Jewish school in Tashkent's Yakkasaroy district that provides secondary education for students; the curriculum consists of Jewish cultural studies, religious studies of the Torah, and Hebrew. There also is a kindergarten in Tashkent attended by children of Jewish families.

The government limited the number of Hajj pilgrims to 5,094, or approximately 20 percent of the country's allowed number of pilgrims. Local mahalla committees, district administrations, the National Security Service, and the state-run Hajj Commission, controlled by the CRA and the Muftiate, reportedly were involved in vetting potential pilgrims. The international religious freedom NGO Forum 18 alleged that there were unwritten instructions prohibiting pilgrims under age 45 from traveling and that those who did travel were subject to screening, lengthy waiting lists, and high costs (including bribes). Anecdotal evidence from local contacts confirmed that it has become exceedingly difficult to participate in the Hajj without resorting to inside contacts and other sources of facilitation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Society was generally tolerant of religious diversity but not of proselytizing. Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish leaders reported high levels of acceptance in society.

Although the government did not prohibit persons from changing religions, there was social pressure, particularly among the majority Muslim population, not to do so. Ethnic Russians, Jews, and non-Muslim foreigners enjoyed greater freedom to choose and

change their religion than did members of Muslim ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Uzbeks.

Some evangelical or Pentecostal Christian churches and churches with ethnic Uzbek converts encountered difficulties stemming from discrimination. There were persistent reports that ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity faced discrimination and harassment.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government representatives engaged with the host government on religious freedom as part of a broader dialogue on respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Embassy officials met with representatives of religious communities, civil society, and government bodies, including the CRA, to discuss specific issues of human rights and religious freedom. The embassy emphasized the importance of religious freedom by including religious leaders in its official events. The U.S. ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar (an evening meal during Ramadan).

When the embassy learned of difficulties faced by religious groups or faith-based foreign aid organizations, it intervened on their behalf where possible, taking actions such as contacting government officials. Embassy officials frequently discussed religious freedom cases with diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring cases and contacting government officials. U.S. officials urged the government to allow more freedom of religious expression and to include religious prisoners of conscience in the annual amnesty, consistently emphasizing that religious tolerance and political security are complementary goals.

The secretary of state redesignated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act on August 18, for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with this designation, the secretary of state issued a waiver of sanctions on the same date to "further the purposes of the act."