

UZBEKISTAN 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

An April revision to the constitution defines the country as a “secular state.” The constitution establishes a separation between the state and religious organizations and bars the interference of the state in the activities of religious organizations. The law on liberty of conscience and religious organizations provides for the right of citizens to choose their faith or not to profess a faith, and it bars coercion and proselytization and missionary work. The law forbids coercing minors to be involved in religious organizations against their or their parents’ will. It forbids the use of religion to overthrow or undermine the state, infringe on the rights of others, incite hatred, or encroach on “the health and morals of citizens.” The law prohibits the creation of religiously based political parties as well as including religious materials in the public-school curriculum.

Unlike in previous years, the government provided no data on prisoners held for alleged religious extremism crimes or for belonging to religious fundamentalist organizations. Local media outlets reported at least five individuals whom courts sentenced to either prison or house arrest due to their online religious activities. In May, a court sentenced Jakhongir Ulugmuradov, a student at Tashkent State University of Economics, to three years in prison for sending a religious song to his classmates. According to a BBC report, the mother of Sardor Rahmonkulov – who was sentenced to five years in prison in January for downloading and sharing a banned religious song but was alleged by the government to belong to a terrorist group – said her son was tortured in pretrial detention by members of the Tashkent

Region police department to coerce him to confess to participating in extremist activities. In March, Rahmonkulov's punishment was changed to conditional judgment, and he was released. According to human rights activist Anvar Nazirov, Tashkent courts sentenced four members of an atheist Uzbek language Facebook group to three to five years of house arrest for "inciting religious hatred" after posting memes and jokes poking fun of Islam on a Facebook page. In April, international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 published a report stating authorities had raided the Easter services of the Council of Churches Baptist Church in Qarshi. According to the most recent government figures, there were 2,356 religious organizations officially registered in the country, 197 of which were non-Muslim. The government reported it registered 13 Muslim organizations and one Christian organization during the year. In October, the government adopted a law banning the wearing of garments that cover the face, which commentators said was a de facto ban on full-body burqas and *niqabs*. Human rights activists continued to state that President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's reforms and the law on religion did not resolve the cases of prisoners who were incarcerated for their religious practices and beliefs prior to Mirziyoyev's accession to presidency in 2016 and remained incarcerated. According to local activists, despite improvements and the release of many religious prisoners since the start of Mirziyoyev's presidency, a significant number of prisoners remained in custody for engaging in religious practices. Former UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed released a follow-up report assessing the government's follow-through of his initial 2018 recommendations. The report indicated that in almost every area, the government had either "not implemented" or only "partially implemented" his recommendations.

Human rights activists reported societal pressure to adopt Islamic customs and dress, which they attributed to the rise in openly practiced Islam. They

said many schoolgirls faced peer pressure to wear a headscarf. Activists and human rights groups continued to report sporadic social pressure among the majority Muslim population against conversion from Islam to another religion. Human rights activists reported an increase in anti-Christian and antisemitic content on social media channels of popular Islamic bloggers.

In its public outreach and private meetings, U.S. embassy officials drew attention to the continuing inability of religious groups to register as official religious organizations, of groups that proselytize to discuss their beliefs openly, and of parents to educate their children in their faith. Embassy officials also raised the continuing detention and imprisonment of individuals based on their religious beliefs. In March, the embassy hosted Ahmed Shaheed to discuss the country's progress in adopting his recommendations as special rapporteur following a 2017 visit. Members of the government, civil society representatives, and foreign diplomats attended. In May, nine members of the government participated in a U.S. government-sponsored program in the United States in which officials from the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Human Rights Council, and the Ministry of Justice discussed religious freedom with U.S. government, NGO, and religious group representatives. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials also met with representatives of religious groups, civil society organizations, and relatives of religious prisoners to discuss freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 36 million (midyear 2023). According to the Uzbek government, there are 35 million Sunni Muslims, 122,000 Shiite Muslims, 822,000 Orthodox Christians, and 540,000

adherents of other faiths. According to Boston University's World Religion Database, other significant religious groups are Baha'is (1,000 adherents), Buddhists (37,000), Jews (4,000), and Zoroastrians (1,000). A local priest estimates there are 700 practicing Roman Catholics. According to an article published in September in the *Economist*, the country's Bukharan Jews "are disappearing," with no more than 100 remaining in Bukhara and a few hundred across the country. The country's Jewish community reports most of its members chose to migrate to Israel for economic and religious purposes.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

An April revision to the constitution defines the country as a "secular state" and states, "Freedom of conscience shall be guaranteed to all. Everyone shall have the right to profess or not to profess any religion. Any compulsory imposition of religion shall be impermissible." The constitution establishes a separation between the state and religious organizations and bars the interference of the state in the activities of religious organizations.

According to the constitution, an individual's freedom to practice or not practice a given faith 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 2021 law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (religion law) further details the scope of, and limitations on, the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief. The religion law criminalizes unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production, distribution, and storage of religious publications; and prohibits proselytism and other missionary activities. This law provides a registration process for religious organizations that allows online applications. It requires an organization to have 50 founding members to register and stipulates all founding members must live in one district or city. It prohibits private religious education.

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, involves pornography, or promotes narcotic usage. According to the Ministry of

Justice, the government may permanently 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.” Organizing or participating in an illegal religious group is a criminal offense punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of 15 to 30 million soum (\$1,200-\$2,400). The law also 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. The government currently maintains a list of 22 organizations it considers “terrorist” that are banned in the country.

According to the 2021 religion law, all religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice; without registration, a group may not carry out any activities. 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 50 citizens who are 18 or older; and providing a charter in Uzbek 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 CRA, a federal executive-level committee, and the *khokimiyat* (local government) for preapproval. 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 Emergency Situations.

The 2021 religion law requires electronic copies of the documents affirming that the leading founding members have the religious education necessary to preach their faith. Denominations whose faith does not provide for a system of professional religious education are exempted from this requirement. All religious groups must report their source of income and obtain CRA concurrence to register. The law also requires that khokimiyats concur with the registration of groups in their areas and that a religious 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 zoning board, sanitary-epidemiological services, and fire services. After checking the submitted certificates, khokimiyats grant permission to register to the religious group seeking registration. The Ministry of Justice has one month to review and approve, deny, or return the application for revision.

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 geographic areas where it is registered. Even if it is registered in one area, a religious group may not expand to another area until it completes the registration process there. 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 16 registered religious groups, including Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups, whom the government appoints to serve as consultants. The council discusses ways of ensuring compliance with the law, the rights and responsibilities of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion. The CRA also monitors internet discussion of religion and reports materials it deems extremist to law enforcement, and it publishes and regularly updates a list of websites and social media accounts the Supreme Court deems to be extremist and thus prohibited to access.

According to the 2021 religion law, religious organizations must notify the government of any planned religious activities not part of formal worship services, as well as all religious activities intended for children younger than 16, unless those children have been given parental permission. The law requires registered religious organizations to inform authorities 30 days in advance of holding nonroutine religious meetings and other religious activities at the group's registered address(es). At the beginning of each year, every religious organization must submit a list of planned meetings to the Ministry of Justice. Any meeting outside that list is considered "nonroutine." The administrative code requires all registered religious organizations to seek permission from local authorities and then inform CRA and Ministry of Justice representatives 30 days before holding religious meetings, street processions, or other religious ceremonies occurring outside 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.

According to a 2014 Cabinet of Ministers resolution, 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 religious meetings as well as literary and other religion-based study groups not related to worship. The administrative penalty for violating these provisions ranges from fines of 15 million to 30 million soum (\$1,200-\$2,400) or up to 15 days' imprisonment.

The criminal code punishes proselytizing with up to three years in prison and prohibits teaching children religion against their will as well as efforts to involve minors in 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, 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 (six million to 30 million soum in 2022) (\$490 to \$2,400) for private individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage, or 15 million to 45 million soum (\$1,200-\$3,600). The administrative code permits the confiscation of such illegal 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 may issue an order garnishing wages. The criminal code imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage (30 million to 60 million soum) (\$2,400-\$4,800) or “corrective labor” for up to three years for repeat offenders.

The state forbids banned “extremist religious groups” from distributing any type of publication. Individuals who distribute leaflets or literature deemed extremist via social media 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 Special Commission for Preparation of Materials on Clemency to review the prison profiles of convicts sentenced on charges of religious extremism. To be eligible for clemency, prisoners must admit guilt and express remorse for their alleged crimes. Another commission, the Commission on Clemency, reviews the petitions of persons who “mistakenly became members of prohibited organizations.” This commission may exonerate citizens from criminal liability on religious grounds. Citizens are exempted from criminal liability if they have not undergone military training provided by an organization the government views as extremist, participated in terrorism financing, or distributed information promoting terrorism.

The law prohibits private teaching of religion and 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 that provide basic information on world religions or the study of national culture in the curriculum.

Religious schools may operate only after registering with the Ministry of Justice and receiving the appropriate license. Individuals teaching religious subjects at religious schools 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 two 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 to register 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 and religious freedom activists, clerics from various religious groups who obtain their qualifications abroad may officiate within licensed premises.

The law allows individuals objecting to military service based on their religious beliefs to perform alternative civilian service.

Under the law, the human rights ombudsman has the responsibility to consider applications, proposals, and complaints of citizens, foreign persons,

and stateless individuals in the country regarding the actions or failure to act of organizations or officials in violation of their rights, freedoms, and legal interests. The ombudsman also has the right to conduct independent investigations and may enter prison and detention facilities and meet with detainees and prisoners.

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

Government Practices

Activists and international organizations, including Amnesty International, continued to criticize the 2021 religion law, saying too many of the earlier standing restrictions remained. Specifically, the group said it was concerned about bans on the exercise, teaching, and sharing of religious beliefs without state approval, as well as tight censorship of religious literature. Former UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Shaheed released a report assessing the government's follow-through of his initial 2018 recommendations. The report indicated that in almost every area, the government either had "not implemented" or only "partially implemented" his recommendations.

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

In December, authorities released Fazilkhoja Arifkhojayev, whom Forum 18 reported authorities had tortured and sentenced in 2022 to seven-and-a-half years in a labor camp for criticizing state-appointed imams.

The BBC reported that the mother of Sardor Rahmonkulov – whom authorities sentenced to five years in prison in January for downloading and

sharing a banned religious song – said her son was tortured in pretrial detention by members of the Tashkent Region police department to coerce him to confess to participating in extremist activities. The government accused Rahmonkulov of belonging to Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari, which the government consider to be a terrorist group, and intending to go to Syria to fight. Rahmonkulov's mother said the officers placed a plastic bag over his head, threatening to asphyxiate him. In March, in accordance with an Appellate Court decision, the punishment was changed to conditional judgment; a two-year probation period was set against Rahmonkulov, and he was released.

According to Forum 18, starting early in the year, Tashkent police targeted Muslims through raids, house searches, detentions, arrests, administrative punishments for teaching religion without state permission as well as opening criminal investigations. In one incident, police reportedly detained a young woman they had previously targeted for wearing a hijab and studying Arabic. After 10 hours' questioning without food or water, the woman, who is anemic, fainted. Police did not explain why they raided the family home, pressured the family, and detained the woman.

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.

The government continued to frequently charge with extremism those who were found to possess materials included on the CRA's list of banned materials.

According to human rights activist Anvar Nazirov, a court sentenced four members of an atheist Uzbek language Facebook group to three to five

years of house arrest for “inciting religious hatred” after posting memes and jokes poking fun of Islam on a Facebook page.

During the year, local media outlets reported at least five individuals whom courts sentenced to either prison or house arrest due to their online activities: Sardor Rahmonkulov, who received five years in prison in January for downloading banned “*nasheeds*,” religious songs the Committee on Religious Affairs determined propagated extremism (upon appeal, the court released Rahmonkulov from prison); Jahongir Ulugmurodov, who received a two-year prison sentence in May for sharing a YouTube link via his Telegram channel the CRA determined was “impregnated with the ideas of fanaticism” (upon appeal, the court reduced Ulugmurodov’s sentence to six months’ parole); a teenager in Jizzakh, who received three years’ house arrest in May for creating a Telegram channel and “posting and discussing religious content”; a woman who was sentenced to three years of house arrest in June after she “liked” a banned religious lecture on a social media site in 2018 while living in Turkey (the court said the “like” constituted distribution); and a blogger, who received three years in prison after posting and distributing banned religious content on social media.

Several members of the banned groups Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tawhid and Jihad Katibati convicted in 2022 remain incarcerated.

Unlike in previous years, the government provided no data on prisoners held for alleged religious extremism crimes or for belonging to religious fundamentalist organizations.

According to the government, during the year it pardoned 97 persons who had been sentenced for participating in the activities of prohibited organizations.

Religious freedom activists said the government's security services continued to fabricate charges against detainees to make a "show" of being tough on religious extremism. One prominent human rights lawyer stated authorities had charged some individuals with extremism based solely on incoming messages to their phones. Government officials said these messages referenced Hizb ut-Tahir, even though the arrestees themselves did not write, forward, or respond to these messages.

Religious activists again reported many prisoners sentenced on the basis of their religious activities 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.

One human rights defender who spent years focusing on prisoners incarcerated on the basis of their religious activities reported that religious freedom was no longer a major human rights issue, a view sources stated was shared by many activists in the country. In September, however, another human rights defender told Forum 18 that when President Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power, "he promised freedom, and there was relative religious freedom in the initial stage of his presidency...[but now] pressure on Muslims and Muslim activity is growing."

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

On September 13, Radio Ozodlik, a service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, reported that on September 10, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov and State Security Services Chairman Abdusalam Azizov held a meeting with

senior-level officials to discuss “increasing religious radicalization” in the country. The media outlet, citing an official who was at the meeting, said Aripov told those gathered to “choose religion or work in the state,” stating disapproval of a growing trend of public officials praying in their offices, practicing polygamy, or attending Friday prayers during working hours. The Prime Minister’s office officially denied the reports, stating the details of the meeting were “being interpreted incorrectly” and were “completely untrue.”

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

International observers continued to state that the 2021 religion law did little to change the nature of religious freedom in the country. In May, Human Rights Watch opined that the government continued to restrict religious freedom despite promises to eliminate restrictions, and government authorities still considered legitimate expression of religious sentiment or belief “extremism.” Human Rights Watch called on government authorities to ensure that rights-violating provisions related to freedom of religion in the criminal code and in the 2021 religion law be amended in line with international human rights law.

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 remained banned: Akramites, Islamic Movement of Turkistan, Islamic Jihad Group, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami, al-Jihad, al-Qa’ida, World Jihad Foundation, Muslim Brotherhood, Zamiyati Islomi Tablig, Jamaat-e-Islami-i-Pakistan, Eastern Turkistan Liberation Organization, East Turkistan Islamic Movement, Boz Kurd, Abu Saif Group, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-

Islam, Islamic State, Tawhid va Jihad, Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhariy, Jamoat-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 a matter of preventing the overthrow of secular authorities and the incitement of interreligious instability and hatred.

Although by law, only registered religious organizations may assemble and perform religious acts, many members of nonregistered minority congregations reported they were able to use the facilities of a registered congregation to worship without government intervention. Representatives of several Christian churches that in previous years had unsuccessfully sought registration reported they decided not to renew their applications because they could operate without obtaining approval.

In April, Forum 18 published a report stating that authorities had raided the Easter services of the Council of Churches Baptist Church in Qarshi. The article said Ministry of Internal Affairs officials conducting the raid beat and used electric cattle prods on members of the congregation. Videos posted online by the International Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches which the union said were of the raid showed authorities attempting to enter the church while congregants attempted to prevent them. Other videos showed authorities talking with apparent church leadership and ordering the musicians to stop playing. The videos and other sources did not show authorities using violence or the presence of cattle prods. According to Forum 18, the same church was raided in February as well. The government stated the services were hosted by the International Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches (MSC ECB), an organization not registered in the country, and included performances by a group of Christians from outside the country. The government stated the MSC ECB

did not notify the government of the planned performances as required by law, nor could it because the group refused to apply for registration. The government also stated residents complained to law enforcement about the large gathering.

According to media and the government, the ban on private religious instruction continued to result in the government detaining and fining members of religious communities. The ban included meetings of persons gathered to discuss their faith or to exchange religious ideas. Some members of religious groups said religious discussions continued to be considered taboo because no one wanted to risk being punished for proselytism or for teaching religious principles in private. During the year, authorities convicted 16 persons for “violation of the procedure for teaching religious beliefs,” fining six of these persons, sentencing two others to garnishment of wages, sentencing three to compulsory community service, and sentencing five to house arrest.

During the year, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported police detained members of their community for proselytizing. In the Jehovah’s Witnesses 2023 report, the group said they were not severely persecuted in Uzbekistan and were often treated with respect but stated there were several instances of what they referred to as “preventive conversations” with local law enforcement requesting information on religious meetings and leaders. The report stated that occasionally such local officials insulted, pressured, or threatened Witnesses, and that sometimes they pressured converts to “return to Islam.” Additionally, a Jehovah’s Witnesses fact sheet reported one of their members, Nadezhda Manatskova, was fined 1,650,000 som (\$130) for “forcing a person to accept her religion.” The fact sheet said Manatskova “spoke peacefully of her faith” to a woman.

Civil society observers and religious freedom activists continued to report that authorities allowed greater freedom than in the past for adherents to practice their religion openly, permitting public acts such as going to Friday prayers and celebrating Ramadan. According to Forum 18, however, prisoners in at least one prison located in the Tashkent Region were warned not to fast during the month of Ramadan, which began in late March. Reportedly, prisoners were told they would be violating prison regulations if they fasted and risked being sent back to prison camp with harsher conditions. Authorities did not provide food for *suhur*, the morning meal before the start of the fast.

The government continued to restrict access to websites, including Forum 18. The government maintained a list of illegal websites it said were linked to Islamic extremist activity.

International human rights organizations continue to criticize the law's registration requirements for religious organizations. In May, Human Rights Watch said the government continued to unduly prolong the registration process and impose arbitrary requirements, especially for groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses.

At year's end, there were 2,356 religious organizations officially registered in the country, 197 of which were non-Muslim. The government reported it registered 13 Muslim and one Christian religious organization by year's end.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported they continued to face what they described as insurmountable challenges to registering any new congregations in the country. Since the passing of the religion law, they reported trying to register two new congregations, one in Samarkand and one in Tashkent. In July, Jehovah's Witnesses received a letter from the Tashkent City

government, stating they were unable to register their Tashkent congregation due to repeated complaints from citizens regarding “missionary and proselytizing activities,” which are illegal.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported being the target of harassment and mistreatment due to the organization’s unregistered status, except for its sole registered community in Chirchik. The group continued to attempt registration in seven districts of the country. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that local governments continued to block official registration of additional congregations for administrative reasons. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, local agencies such as local branches of the Ministry of Construction or local fire safety offices, among others, refused to provide the documentation required to complete the registration process.

In September, Nuriddin Kholiqnazarov, Grand Mufti of Uzbekistan and a government employee, warned in a video against religious “excesses” such as the wearing of full-body burqas or long beards, saying they ran counter to Uzbekistani traditions. He described such practices as Arab customs, not Islamic rules, and he encouraged Uzbekistanis to continue their own longstanding cultural traditions.

Commentators throughout the year remarked upon the rising number of citizens choosing to adopt Islamic dress, such as women wearing headscarves, in public. On October 31, the administration abolished a law imposing fines on religious dress in public. In October, the government adopted a law that banned the wearing of garments that cover the face to such a degree that the wearer could not be identified. Although not expressly a ban on certain religious attire, commentators and media said the new law represented a de facto ban on full-body burqas and niqabs. According to Forum 18, starting in the summer, police resumed detentions

on the street of Muslim women wearing religious clothes, including the hijab and the niqab, as well as of men with long beards. A human rights defender told Forum 18 that police had shaved off the beards of some men. The government denied that it was either detaining women wearing religious clothes or shaving off the beards of Muslim men. Avazjon Khasanov, Deputy Chief of the Interior Ministry's Counterterrorism Department, which handles freedom of religion or belief cases, denied police were stopping and detaining women wearing the hijab or niqab. He also denied police were stopping and detaining men wearing long beards, or that the police shaved off the beards of some men. "You were given false information, no such raids against Muslims took place," he said.

Media reported that the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) fined a man on September 12 after videos of him and his niqab-clad bride, taken during their August 31 marriage ceremony, circulated on social media. In a statement, the MVD stated the man gave the event too religious a tone, saying he discriminated against his bride by "wrapping her up." The man was charged with illegal distribution of religious materials.

According to the CRA, in May, the Muslim Board of Fergana fired Imam Shukrullo Egamberdiev after he gave a sermon saying no one would want to marry girls who go to school dances. He also criticized migrants who preferred to work as "slaves" in another country. Authorities fined another imam, Shavkat Hasan, after he uploaded a video of a recorded sermon that he had not cleared with the CRA.

According to the CRA, the government continued to disseminate, through the muftiate, sermons for imams to read during Friday prayers. The government continued to control the amount and content of materials published by the muftiate. The Muslim Board selected muftiate staff.

Although there were no reports during the year of the government limiting the volume of public calls to prayers, which occurred in previous years, media sources reported that many mosques voluntarily did so.

Activists reported law enforcement regularly seized citizens' phones without a warrant to examine them for illegal religious materials.

The government continued to use an estimated 12,000 *mahalla* committees as a source of information on potential "extremists." The mahalla committees provided various social support functions, including the distribution of social welfare assistance to the elderly, single parents, or families with many children; intervention in cases of domestic violence; and adjudication of disputes among residents. They also informed government and law enforcement authorities on community members. On March 1, the President issued a decree that reorganized the mahalla system to give it greater powers of oversight and surveillance in the local community. According to activists, the decree increased the responsibility of mahallas in overseeing the daily activities of religious groups in their areas.

Property disputes between registered religious organizations and local government persisted. Leaders of an historic Roman Catholic Church in Fergana continued to seek to reclaim the use of the church, whose ownership the government ordered transferred from the municipality to the Church in 2021. During the Soviet era, the local government allowed families to move into the back of the church and convert some of its rooms into apartments. During the year, church leadership reported the government gave new apartments to the families, and they were in the process of relocating to their new residences at year's end.

During the year, the national government, a Buddhist temple's leadership, and the local government did not reach agreement on terms of relocation of a Buddhist temple in Tashkent or for compensation for the move. In 2022, construction crews built a bridge directly over the temple's property to expand a metro line in the city. According to temple leaders, they were compelled to close because the new construction made it too dangerous to continue worship services. Progress in securing an agreement was further hampered by the temple's Uzbekistan-based leader's death in midyear.

During the year, a historic Baptist church in Bukhara was unable to resume activities and find an alternative location to worship after a city water main burst and flooded it in 2021. Although the church was registered with the government, it was forced to cease operations because the flooding severely weakened its structure, and church leadership deemed it unsafe to hold services. The members of the church were not allowed to hold services elsewhere because by law, religious groups may function only in their approved buildings. According to the church's pastor, despite government promises to help relocate the congregation, the church did not have a place to worship by year's end.

According to Christian religious leaders, many Christians, including Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to have no access to an authorized house of worship within 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) and gathered in private "house churches," leaving them vulnerable to police harassment and abuse because such gatherings remained illegal. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that local governments used pretexts such as building code violations or coerced landlords into withdrawing rental agreements for facilities to effectively block registration of new congregations.

The government, former prisoners, and other observers reported that, in general, prisoners were able to practice their religious beliefs freely, and that accommodations were frequently made for prayers times and fasting. Some observers, however, reported that this was not the case in certain prisons where the wardens were more hostile to religion.

In April, the Tashkent Russian Orthodox diocese laid the first stone of a new Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Tashkent. The original cathedral was blown up in the 1930s. Some Muslims criticized the government for allowing the construction because Russian authorities recently refused to allow the building of a mosque in Moscow.

The government continued to limit access to Islamic publications deemed extremist, and during the year arrested individuals whom it said distributed religious literature without official permission, such as unauthorized sermons contained on cell phones, any printed material from the Jehovah's Witness organization, or any material not explicitly approved by the CRA. The government continued to require a statement in every domestic publication indicating the source of its publication authority. According to marketplace shoppers, it continued to be 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. The CRA also continued to block the importation of some Christian and Islamic literature and to monitor conversations on social media for illegal religious content. The CRA stated it reported materials it deemed extremist to law enforcement agencies.

Unlike in previous years, the government did not provide information on criminal cases under the law forbidding the possession of religious literature that the government has not formally approved.

In mid-May, the CRA notified online media outlet Kun.uz it would have to make at least 23 edits or cuts to the script of a documentary it produced on religious freedom in the United States. The cuts listed in a published letter from the CRA included segments discussing the activities of an Uzbekistani-run Islamic academy in Orlando, Florida. The censors also disapproved of quotes describing fear among Muslims under the Karimov regime, the relative freedom to engage in religious expression in the United States, and some criticisms of U.S. public schools. In December, the government stated these changes were aimed at avoiding misunderstanding among the audience, and they were CRA recommendations, not requirements.

During the year, the government maintained a list of 719 websites and social media platforms that “propagate extremism” and are illegal to download. Banned social media channels included individual and group accounts on Facebook such as “Islam Abu Khalil” or “Alhaq_tv.”

Forum 18 reported that in June, border guards in Fergana detained a Jehovah’s Witness while she crossed from Kyrgyzstan into Uzbekistan and found a Bible in her bag. A court fined her 1,650,000 Soum (\$130).

In February, customs officials at the land border with Kazakhstan seized Bibles and other Christian books from Nikolai Smirnov, a Council of Churches Baptist visiting from Kazakhstan. They sent the books to the Religious Affairs Committee for “expert analysis.” Although the committee found there was nothing illegal in the books, a case was brought against Smirnov under the administrative code. On April 21, the Tashkent District Criminal Court in the town of Keles held a first hearing. At a second hearing on May 15, Judge Zafar Abbosov found Smirnov guilty and issued him a written warning. The judge ordered the books destroyed. "This took place in my

absence – I was not even informed about it and only got the decision a month later," Smirnov told Forum 18 from Kazakhstan on October 5.

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

According to Muslim representatives, some official imams stated they could not teach Islam to children because the law forbids it. Fee-based courses on the Arabic language and Quranic studies for the public continued to be available but limited to adults.

Government officials reported public schools included courses that teach the history and basic tenants of the world's major religions. The government stated the aim of these courses was to educate students on the concept of world religions while remaining secular.

The government-controlled muftiate continued to operate a call center and website created in 2019 and staffed by religious experts that allowed citizens to ask general questions pertaining to Islam.

During the year, the government reported that 15 religious educational organizations were operating. The country's 13 Islamic higher educational institutions (three universities and 10 madrassahs) had 2,230 students, 505 of whom were new students in the 2023/24 academic year. There were 58 students at the Tashkent Orthodox Seminary (10 new students in the 2023/24 academic year) and 51 students at the Tashkent Christian Seminary (nine new students in the 2023/24 academic year). The government

operated 28 educational centers for teaching the Quran, with 4,440 students during the year.

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. It did not permit funding of any kind for religious purposes from foreign governments. The government-run International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan continued to provide the country's religious education institutions (universities and madrassahs) with academic experts, teachers, and mentors, but it did not permit any other Islamic higher education institutions to provide such experts.

The government continued to prohibit the separate training of Shia imams inside the country.

There were three public Islamic training academies to prepare clerics in the country and 10 madrassahs for secondary education. Government officials and Muslim leaders stated this was not enough to meet the demand for Muslim clergy.

According to the government, since 2021, citizens have been eligible for admission to al-Azhar University in Egypt at the CRA's recommendation. According to the procedure, the CRA-established Advisory Council on Assistance to Citizens of Uzbekistan in Foreign Religious Educational Institutions reviewed 545 applications to study at al-Azhar for the 2021 academic year and 120 applications for the 2022 academic year.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

According to activists and media, the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry ordered authorities to close approximately 20 cafes and restaurants with Islamic words in their names. Chamber of Commerce and health officials confiscated prayer rugs and ordered cafe owners to remove the word “halal” from the name of cafes (ostensibly because there is no laboratory in the country that issues a certificate for halal products) and to start selling alcohol in their establishments. According to activists, the day after the raids, Prime Minister Aripov ordered authorities to reopen all the cafes and restaurants, stating the Chamber’s Chairman had overstepped his bounds.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

Pilgrimage regulations continued to require pilgrims to apply to local mahalla committees. The CRA coordinated ticketing on national air carrier flights to Jeddah for the Hajj pilgrimage. Local mahalla committees, district administrations, security services, the CRA, and the muftiate reportedly participated in vetting potential Hajj pilgrims. Previously, only state-run travel companies were allowed to organize pilgrimage tours. According to sources, the government continued to maintain a monopoly on organizing Hajj pilgrimages and controlling the lists of pilgrims but relaxed restrictions for those wishing to make the shorter Umrah pilgrimage. During the year, the government authorized private tour operators to organize Umrah pilgrimages.

According to the government, there was no limit on the number of persons who may participate in Umrah pilgrimages. Potential Hajj pilgrims were required to seek government approval before traveling. During the year, 15,500 persons participated in the Hajj pilgrimage and 41,000 participated in Umrah pilgrimages.

Many hotels provided prayer mats and *qibla* direction finders that were used by Muslims to indicate the direction of Mecca. Many airports and train stations continued to maintain small prayer rooms on their premises.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Activists reported societal pressure to adopt Islamic customs and dress, which they attributed to the rise in openly practiced Islam. According to activists, many schoolgirls faced peer pressure to wear a headscarf.

Activists and human rights groups continued to report sporadic social pressure among the majority Muslim population against conversion from Islam to another religion. Religious community members said ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity at times risked harassment and discrimination. Some said social stigma because of 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. Individuals who reported these incidents declined to share their names or even the details of their cases for fear of retaliation.

Government officials and human rights activists continued to express concern regarding the rise in popularity of Islamic video bloggers who espoused what they said was a hardline, intolerant version of Islam. Human rights activists also reported an increase in anti-Christian and antisemitic content on social media channels of popular Islamic bloggers. The government reported it was trying to increase its own efforts at providing

religious education to its citizens as an antidote to what it has called a less “enlightened” form of Islam.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses 2023 report stated that defamatory and erroneous information on Jehovah’s Witnesses frequently appeared online and on social media, including accusations of extremism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials and senior officials from the Department of State and other U.S government agencies raised religious freedom concerns with the country’s leadership. At various levels of government and in different forums, U.S. officials continued to urge the government to register more religious organizations, streamline registration, amend the religion law to allow members of religious groups to practice their faiths freely outside registered houses of worship, and allow parents to educate their children in their faith. U.S. officials raised the problems of the treatment of prisoners and the existence of those incarcerated on account of religious activities and urged the government not to imprison individuals for peaceful religious beliefs and practices. They continued to press the government to provide protection for public discourse on religion, to end the arrests of individuals solely for online religious activities, and to 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.

In March, the embassy hosted former UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed to discuss the country’s progress in

adopting his recommendations as special rapporteur following a 2017 visit. Members of the government, civil society, and foreign diplomats attended.

In April, the embassy hosted an iftar for women Islamic leaders. The Ambassador made remarks mentioning the growth of Islam in the United States and urged the women to consider their role as religious leaders and in society at large.

In May, embassy staff participated in a U.S. government-designed training session aimed at better understanding how to work with members of religious communities. As part of the training, embassy employees visited religious sites in Tashkent, and the government sent representatives to discuss the status of religious freedom in the country.

In May, nine members of the government participated in a U.S. government program in the United States. The officials from the CRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Human Rights Council, and the Ministry of Justice discussed religious freedom with U.S. government, NGO, and religious representatives to increase their understanding of the U.S. approach to religious freedom.

Embassy representatives frequently discussed individual religious freedom cases with foreign diplomatic colleagues to coordinate advocacy efforts, including in monitoring court cases, submitting joint letters to the government on religious freedom issues, and meeting with government officials on religious freedom concerns.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met 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 of Muslims regarding the wearing of hijabs and beards. In its public outreach and private meetings, the embassy again drew attention to the continuing inability of religious groups to register houses of worship, of groups that proselytize to discuss their beliefs openly, and of parents to educate their children in their faith. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials continued to meet with relatives of prisoners to discuss freedom of religion 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.