

USDOS – US Department of State

2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and separation of government and religion. NGO representatives said the government continued the severe physical abuse of some persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of religious extremism or of participating in Islamic activity not approved by the government. A religious freedom activist said more than 2,000 prisoners remained in detention, convicted of involvement in terrorist and extremist activities or of belonging to religious fundamentalist organizations. In September, prison officials reportedly beat and tortured incarcerated pro-religious freedom blogger Tulkan Astanov for praying during his imprisonment. Astanov's wife requested an investigation of the reported physical abuse but received no response from the government by year's end. The government did not register any of the 17 religious organizations that had sought and been denied registration previously. This was in contrast with the 17 churches registered between 2018 and 2020. On July 5, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed into law a new version of the law on religion, which the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) stated generally ignored recommendations made in 2020 by the Venice Commission of the OSCE and did little to change the nature of religious freedom in the country. According to international experts, while the revised religion law streamlined the registration process, many aspects of the legislation remained seriously inadequate in comparison to internationally recognized best practices – including continued criminalization of unregistered religious organizations, state control over religious literature, and prohibitions on private teaching of religion. The law lifted the ban on appearing in public spaces in religious clothing, but the government continued to restrict religious attire for government employees and students. Despite the removal of restrictions on religious attire for those outside government and education, media reported uneven implementation of this aspect of the new law. In May, according to media reports, local government officials rounded up an unspecified number of men in the city of Angren and forcibly shaved off their beards. According to government spokespersons, the government also continued its practice of strictly controlling religious education for youth by shutting down private religious schools operating without government permission and fining individuals who provided religious education. Human rights activists said President Mirziyoyev's reforms and the new law on religion did not resolve the pending cases of prisoners incarcerated under former President Islam Karimov for their religious practices and beliefs. Local activists stated that despite improvements and the release of many religious prisoners since the start of Mirziyoyev's presidency, including the release of notable prisoners Tursunov and Madmarov during the year, a significant number of prisoners from this period remained in custody for engaging in peaceful religious practices.

Members of religious minority groups stated that they continued to experience social pressure from the majority Muslim population against members of their religious organizations who converted from Islam. One religious leader reported some imams repeating anti-Christian slurs during public sermons.

In its public outreach and private meetings, the U.S. 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, of parents to educate their children in their faith, and of detentions and imprisonment of individuals based on their religious beliefs. The embassy and visiting U.S. government officials raised the issue of registration and concerns about the deficiencies of the religion law prior to and after its adoption with government officials. Embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials also continued to meet with representatives of religious groups, civil society, and relatives of religious prisoners to discuss freedom of conscience and belief.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.8 million (midyear 2021). According to the national government, the population as of September reached 35 million. According to U.S. government estimates, 88 percent of the population is Muslim, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates 96 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni of the Hanafi school. The government states that approximately 1 percent of the population is Shia of the Jaafari school, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. Approximately 2.2 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, compared with 3.5 percent in 2019; according to reports and statistics; this number continues to decline with the emigration of ethnic Russian and other Orthodox individuals. The government states that the remaining 1.6 percent of the population includes small communities of Roman Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and atheists. According to the government, the Jewish population – a mix of Ashkenazi and Sephardic (Bukharan) – numbers 5,425. The vast majority – approximately 3,500 Ashkenazi and fewer than 2,000 Bukharan Jews – live in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley. The Jewish population continues to decline because of emigration.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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

A new version of the law on "Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" signed by President Mirziyoyev on July 5 further details the scope of, and limitations on, the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief. The law maintains criminalization of unregistered religious activity; requires official approval of the content, production, and distribution and storage of religious publications; and prohibits proselytism and other missionary activities. The new religion law simplifies the registration process for religious organizations, which includes lifting requirements on the citizenship status of organization leaders, eliminating the requirement to have notary certification of documents, reducing processing times, and enabling online applications. It reduces the number of founding members required from 100 to 50 but adds a new requirement that all founders must live in one district or city. The new law also lifts the ban on appearing in public spaces in religious attire. It retains restrictions on 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 or involves pornography or promoting 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." It criminalizes membership in organizations banned as terrorist groups. It is a criminal offense punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of four to eight million soum (\$370-\$740) to organize or participate in an illegal religious group. 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.

By law, all religious groups must register online with the Ministry of Justice. The law states a religious group may carry out its activities only after the ministry registers it. The law lists a series of requirements, including having a permanent presence in eight of the country's 14 administrative units for central registration; presenting a membership list of at least 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 Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) for preapproval and the *khokimiyat* (local government). Groups must submit "letters of guarantee" from the regional branches of the Ministry of Construction, the State Sanitary and Epidemiological Service, and the Department of the State Fire Safety Service, under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The law requires electronic copies of the documents stating the leading founding members have the religious education necessary to preach their faith. Denominations whose faith does not provide for a system of religious vocational 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 the group present notification from khokimiyat authorities stating the legal and postal addresses of the organization conform to all legal requirements, including obtaining authorization certificates from the main architectural division, sanitary-epidemiological services, and fire services. After checking the submitted certificates, khokimiyats grant registration permission to the religious group seeking registration. By law, the Ministry of Justice may take up to one month to review a registration application and may approve or deny the registration or cease review without issuing a decision.

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

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

The CRA oversees registered religious activity. The Council for Confessions under the CRA includes ex officio representatives from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups, 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 government must approve religious activities outside 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 ceremonies at the group's registered address(es). The administrative code requires all registered religious organizations to seek permission from local authorities and then inform the CRA and Ministry of Justice 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.

The law punishes private entities for leasing premises or other property to, or facilitating gatherings, meetings, and street demonstrations of, religious groups without state permission. The law also criminalizes the unauthorized facilitation of children's and youth meetings as well as literary and other study groups related to worship. The administrative penalty for violating these provisions ranges from fines of 13.5 million to 27 million soum (\$1,200-\$2,500) or up to 15 days' imprisonment. These penalties have increased since 2020.

Under the law, state bodies, including *mahalla* (an administrative division comparable to a city ward with responsibilities for a specific neighborhood) committees, as well as nonstate and noncommercial public organizations, have wide-ranging powers to combat suspected "antisocial activity," in cooperation with police. These powers include preventing the activity of unregistered religious organizations, prohibiting propagation of religious views, and considering other questions related to observance of the law.

The new religion law enacted in July lifts the ban on appearing in public spaces in religious clothing. Public institutions are responsible for setting clothing requirements for the employees of governmental organizations and institutions, as well as for students.

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

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

The administrative code punishes the “illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of materials of religious content” with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage (5.4 million to 27 million soum, \$500-\$2,500) for private individuals. The fine for government officials committing the same offense is 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage (13.5 million to 40.5 million soum, \$1,200-\$3,700). The administrative code permits the confiscation of the materials and the “corresponding means of producing and distributing them.” Courts issue fines under the administrative code. In instances where an individual is unable to pay the fine, courts may issue an order garnishing wages. The criminal code imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage (27 million to 54 million soum, \$2,500-\$5,000) or “corrective labor” of up to three years for individuals who commit these acts subsequent to a judgment rendered under the administrative code.

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. Another commission, the Commission on Clemency, reviews the petitions of persons who “mistakenly became members of banned organizations.” This commission may exonerate citizens from all criminal liability. Citizens are exempted from criminal liability if they have not undergone military training 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. It limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. Children may not receive religious education in public schools except for some classes that provide basic information on world religions or “lessons of enlightenment” (the study of national culture) in the curriculum.

Religious schools acquire the right to operate 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 one for women, and a Russian Orthodox and a Protestant seminary have official approval to train religious personnel and provide secondary education. The Cabinet of Ministers considers madrassah-granted diplomas equivalent to other diplomas, enabling madrassah graduates to continue to university-level education.

The law requires imams to have graduated from a recognized religious education facility and 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, clerics from various religious groups who obtained 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 that violated their rights, freedoms, and legal interests, and he or she has the right to conduct independent investigations. The ombudsman 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

Forum 18, an international religious freedom NGO, criticized the new religion law passed in July, saying that it retained too many of the earlier standing restrictions. Specifically, the group said it was concerned about bans on the exercise and teaching of religious beliefs without state sanction and the sharing of beliefs, as well as tight censorship of religious literature. Reportedly, the draft legislation was heavily reviewed by international experts and was available to the public, which made recommendations to improve it, but the government did not accept many of the recommendations.

NGO representatives said the government continued to severely physically abuse persons arrested and jailed on suspicion of religious extremism or of participating in Islamic activity that was not sanctioned by the government. In February, media reported that NGO workers had submitted a complaint to the human rights ombudsman regarding the abuse of religious prisoner Amirbek Khodzhaev, imprisoned in a penal colony in Navoi Region. According to Khodzhaev's mother, authorities stripped him naked, placed him in a "butterfly" position with his hands behind his head at the neck and shoulder blades, then handcuffed and beat him. The NGO also reported officials abused prisoners during Ramadan, preventing them from fasting by forcibly pushing food in their mouths. According to the media report, the ombudsman's office did not take the complaints seriously. According to a medical examination conducted on October 5, eight months after the alleged abuse occurred, "no objective signs of bodily injuries" were found on Khodzhaev's body. The official investigation, which the government said was based on the testimony of convicts serving time with Khodzhaev and the conclusion of the forensic medical examination, did not confirm that colony officers physically abused him.

According to government sources, Ibrahim Kholmatov, sentenced in 2020 to four years and one month under articles of the law dealing with illegal religious organizations' failure to report information about planned or committed terrorist acts, was being treated at a tuberculosis hospital located in Tashkent Province as of midyear. Kholmatov, who served a prison term from 2000 to 2002 for "association with Hizb ut-Tahrir," a banned group the government considers an extremist organization, was arrested at his home in 2020 and later charged with aiding and abetting extremism. According to religious freedom activists, Kholmatov was subjected to "strong psychological pressure" by authorities and was not permitted to see his family. The family told activists that authorities provided little information about the charges against him and said they were not permitted to see him.

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

Throughout the year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs arrested several members of the banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir in the cities of Tashkent, Jizzakh, and Samarkand, and in Syrdarya Region. The ministry did not say how many persons were arrested but it stated the individuals had previously served prison sentences for participating in the group's activities and were continuing to spread extremist ideas after being released. The ministry said it seized weapons and literature containing extremist language and initiated a criminal investigation. The government again did not provide information regarding the total number of persons convicted of engaging in terrorist and extremist activities or on persons belonging to what the government called religious fundamentalist organizations who were serving prison sentences, citing confidentiality of data. In 2018, the most recent year for which the government provided information, 1,503 prisoners remained in detention for these crimes. Religious freedom activist and former political prisoner Akhmadjon Madmarov said in September that more than 2,000 prisoners remained in detention, convicted of involvement in terrorist and extremist activities and of belonging to religious fundamentalist organizations.

On January 26, President Mirziyoyev signed a decree amending regulations governing pardons. The decree allowed the President to pardon or release any convict at his own initiative, regardless of whether the prisoner had filed a pardon request. During the year, President Mirziyoyev released or reduced the sentences of 455 prisoners, 81 of whom had been detained on violations of the law on religion. Of these, 51 were released and 30 had their sentences reduced, according to the government. These releases brought the total number of religious prisoners released or receiving reduced sentences since 2016 to 1,791, according to the government. Human rights activists said President Mirziyoyev's reforms and the new law on religion did not resolve the pending cases of prisoners incarcerated under former President Karimov for their religious practices and beliefs.

Some 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 that authorities based charges on incoming messages to the detainees' phones that were related to the banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir, even though authorities knew the detainees themselves did not write or respond to the messages.

On June 16, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that authorities detained 20 persons in the eastern region of Syrdarya on suspicion of distributing audio and video "extremist materials" through the Telegram social media app. A spokesperson for the region's Internal Affairs Department

said it detained the suspects in the districts of Mirzaobod and Yangier. The spokesperson said the detainees also had weapons.

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

On June 17, authorities released long-term religious prisoner Khayrullo Tursunov, who had been sentenced to a 16-year prison term for religious extremism in 2013. Abdurakhmon Tashanov, head of the local human rights NGO Ezgulik, which covers religious freedom issues, released a report in May on what Ezgulik stated was the physical mistreatment of Tursunov committed by Detachment Chief Akmal Kadyrov at Navoi Penal Colony No. 11. According to Tashanov, evidence of torture included Tursunov's bruises, lesions, and broken bones.

On June 5, the Supreme Court reversed a May 2007 decision regarding Habibullah Madmarov, who had received an additional 16-year sentence for taking part in an extremist conspiracy while he was already incarcerated. On June 18, authorities released Madmarov, the son of Margilan (Fergana Region) human rights activist and former political prisoner Ahmadjon Madmarov, and he returned home after 21 years in prison.

On July 24, the Tashkent Regional Criminal Court acquitted and expunged the charges on five convicts who had been charged under the article “inaction of the authorities” after a series of terrorist attacks in 1999 in Tashkent. The judge reversed a conviction handed down by the Zangiota District Criminal Court in 1999.

Forum 18 stated that officials tortured incarcerated blogger Tulkan Astanov in prison for praying and that he lost 25 kilograms (55 pounds) between January and July. Sentenced to five years' probation in 2019 after posting online discussions about a wide range of religious themes, including calls to allow women to wear hijabs, men to grow beards, and children to pray in mosques, Astanov was rearrested, tried, and sentenced in 2020 for breaking parole terms that restricted him from leaving Tashkent. The Tashkent City Criminal Court heard his appeal in December 2020 but upheld the verdict. On September 22, Mukhayyo Astanova, Astanov's wife, told Forum 18 that ex-prisoners recently told her that prison guards beat Astanov several times and tortured him by pushing his head under water to suffocate him, and that he went on a hunger strike for 20 days between July and August to stop the abuse. On August 18, Mukhayyo Astanova filed a written complaint with the Interior Ministry's Chief Directorate for the Enforcement of Punishments, the government entity in charge of prisons, but at year's end, she had not received notification of the results of the investigation.

On March 3, the Ellikala District Criminal Court approved a request from Ellikala District police probation officers to release Alimardon Sultonov, a trauma surgeon at Ellikkala Central State Hospital in the northwestern autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. In 2020, Sultonov called the local medical emergency service to ask whether there were any COVID-19 cases in Karakalpakstan. Five local government officials then appeared at the hospital to question Sultonov, who was known for posting his views on Muslims' freedom of religion and belief on social media. The officials asked Sultonov if he was in possession of religious texts, and he confirmed he had Islamic texts on his computer. Officials confiscated the computer and opened a criminal case against him, placing him under house arrest and charging him with spreading false information on COVID-19 lockdown measures. They also charged Sultonov with the “illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of religious literature.” In November 2020, the Ellikalansky District Court in the Karakalpakstan Republic sentenced him to 14 months of house arrest, including time served. On January 7, the Karakalpakstan Supreme Court's appeal board upheld Sultonov's sentence.

Forum 18 reported that on March 4, a Samarkand Administrative Court fined Shia Muslim Rashid Ibrahimov approximately two weeks' average wages for having Shia religious material on his mobile phone. Police confiscated his phone. In December 2020, police from the Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department in Samarkand had opened a case against Ibrahimov, the same day traffic police stopped him while he was taking his children to a doctor's appointment. Officers questioned him twice at a police station without a written summons, and they copied all the material on his phone. Police sent material from Ibrahimov's phone, including texts of sermons, to the Religious Affairs Committee – responsible for state censorship of all religious material – for “expert analysis,” although, according to Forum 18, there were no “experts” on Shia Islam on the committee.

On July 5, President Mirziyoyev signed a new version of the law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” which, according to an international religious law expert and other observers, generally ignored the recommendations made in October 2020 by the OSCE's Venice Commission. According to human rights activists and religious groups, the new law did little to change the nature of religious freedom in the country. Observers stated that while some streamlining of the registration process could be considered an improvement, many aspects of the

legislation remained severely deficient – including mandatory continued criminalization of unregistered religious organizations, state control over religious literature, and prohibitions on the private teaching of religion. In 2020, according to an official request of government authorities, the OSCE and the Venice Commission issued an opinion stating that while the government's draft religion law provided some improved protections, it also allowed the government to maintain strict and excessive control over religion and religious freedom. The opinion also stated, "The Draft Law should be substantially revised in order to ensure its full compliance with international human rights standards and OSCE human dimension commitments." The opinion cited as problematic the mandatory registration of religious activity and religious organizations; unnecessary requirements for registration; the continuation of censorship on religious materials and bans on religious expression; excessive discretion by government officials that would allow for discrimination; and interference with a religious organization's right to autonomy. The government deferred the scheduled visit of UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed to spring 2022, despite high level diplomatic encouragement to prioritize the visit.

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses said that although there are improvements to the law, it still did not address many of their concerns, including the need for khokimiyat and CRA approval for registration and prohibitions on missionary activity and gathering for religious meetings in private homes.

During the year, the Supreme Court ruled in nine instances that 68 online profiles, channels, and pages on Facebook, YouTube, and the messaging app Telegram were promoting extremism. The court ruled the materials and content of these sources were prohibited from entering or being manufactured, distributed, or possessed in the country. According to the government, court decisions were in process for another 80 online sources.

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 Turkestan, 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 Turkestan Liberation Organization, East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Boz Kurd, Abu Saif Group, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, Islamic State, Tavhid va Jihad, Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhariy, Jamaat-e-Ansarulloh, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jihadists, and Nurchists. The government stated its actions against persons or groups suspected of religious extremism were not an infringement on religious freedom, but rather were a matter of preventing the overthrow of secular authorities and the incitement of interreligious instability and hatred.

According to media and the government, the ban on private religious instruction continued to result in the government detaining and fining members of religious communities. The ban included meetings of persons gathered to discuss their faith or to exchange religious ideas. Some Muslims said religious discussions continued to be considered taboo because no one wanted to risk being punished for proselytism or for teaching religious principles in private. The government reported that as of October 1, it had shut down 62 *hujras* (illegal private schools that provide Islamic education) – compared with 20 during the same period in 2020, filed three criminal cases for illegal religious education, and found more than 60 persons "administratively liable" (subject to fines) for conducting illegal religious education, compared with 50 persons during the same period in 2020. Although the law forbids the private teaching of religion, the number of these illegal schools has steadily increased since President Mirziyoyev was elected in 2016, and there was a corresponding increase in the number of raids during the year. A religious freedom activist and lawyer stated that authorities were concerned about the dramatic increase in the number of new practicing Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic. He said the government feared this, coupled with unregulated *hujras*, could lead to a rise in extremist beliefs. The lawyer and activist stated he believed the government was highlighting the most extreme cases in order to discourage parents from sending their children to *hujras*. Another activist noted that before 2016, *hujras* were rare and were mostly located in the Fergana Valley, but they were now found throughout the country. On January 11, the Counterterrorism and Extremism Department of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) and the State Emergency Service jointly raided a *hujra* in Tashkent. In a press release, the MOI said parents paid between 1.6 million and 2.2 million soum (\$150-\$200) in tuition to the *hujra* and that the school's leadership subjected minors to corporal punishment for learning infractions.

On June 29, the CRA released an official statement on religious education. According to the CRA, "Some fanatical individuals and groups have unfairly criticized Uzbekistan's unified state policy in the field of religious affairs, misinterpreted the news to suit their own interests, distorted and exaggerated the situation." The CRA stated there was "unnecessary controversy" surrounding proposals to lift the ban on private religious education and training, and the government had "legitimate need to set boundaries" in this area. The CRA also said the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan had created websites and Telegram channels to meet the country's religious education needs. The CRA's comments came amid appeals to President Mirziyoyev and the Senate by religious leader and Islamic scholar Mubashir Ahmad and citizen activists to remove legal restraints on religious

education. In a video address, Ahmad acknowledged recent positive developments, such as approval to wear religious attire in public and in schools and universities, but he called for a review of the ban on private religious education in the country, lowering the age threshold, and increasing access to religious education. Activists noted the State Security Service questioned Ahmad during Ramadan in April and May, asking him to stop raising the issue of children's religious education. Ahmad continued to raise the issue publicly and in June was fined 4.9 million soum (\$450) for the "actions" of his news site *Azon.uz*, which is dedicated to Islamic issues.

On June 21, the Tashkent City Criminal Court fined the founders and senior staff members of *Azon.uz*, as well as the online outlet *Kun.uz*, for the illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of religious materials. *Azon.uz* website founder Ahmad, *Azon.tv* head Farhod Tokhirov, and chief editor of *Azon.uz* Abdulaziz Muborak were each fined 5.3 million soum (\$490); director of Azon New Media LLC Gayratkhoja Sayyedaliev and cofounder of *Kun.uz* Makhjudjon Askarov were each fined approximately 13 million soum (\$1,200). The court based the administrative cases on "religious expertise" from the Interior Ministry's Main Department for Combating Terrorism and Extremism and the CRA. Several of the articles included as evidence in the case were interviews with local Muslim clerics on practices related to Ramadan.

Forum 18 reported that on the evening of May 27, following a police and secret police raid on a Samarkand Region mosque, security officials summoned Asliddin Khudaiberdiyev to appear before the local mahalla committee. The Samarkand Regional Court sentenced Khudaiberdiyev to 15 days in jail under the law forbidding religious education without permission of a registered religious organization, for teaching religious beliefs privately, and for resisting police orders. Khudaiberdiyev was teaching five boys and six adult men in a mosque how to read the Quran and recite the five daily Islamic prayers. Local media reported that on August 11, police detained three women for organizing illegal Islamic religious education in the Uchtepa District of Tashkent. Authorities fined the women for teaching girls and women without having the proper religious educational background and without permission from the central governing body of religious organizations.

The government continued to occasionally restrict access to websites, including those of Jehovah's Witnesses and Forum 18. The government maintained a list of illegal websites it said were linked to Islamic extremist activity.

According to the CRA, the country had 2,313 registered religious organizations representing 16 different faiths, compared with 2,293 registered religious organizations and 16 faiths in 2020. Muslim religious groups operated 2,096 Sunni mosques (compared with 2,071 in 2020), four Shia mosques, 15 branches of the government-controlled Muftiate, and 13 education institutes. There were 190 registered non-Muslim groups, including 38 Orthodox churches, five Catholic churches, 61 Pentecostal churches, 24 Baptist churches, 10 Seventh-day Adventist churches, four New Apostle churches, two Lutheran churches, one Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall, one Voice of God church, 26 Korean Protestant churches, two Armenian Apostolic churches, eight Jewish communities, six Baha'i centers, one Hari Krishna temple, and one Buddhist temple. The Bible Society of Uzbekistan was also registered as of 2020.

The government did not register any new churches during the year, compared with 17 churches registered between 2018 and 2020. According to religious groups, there were 17 known churches that still sought to register. In April, the government denied the registration application for a Shia mosque in Bukhara that had been submitted in 2020, saying the Shia Muslim community needed written permission from seven mahallas, which, according to the community, is not a requirement under the law on religion.

Many religious group representatives continued to report they were unable to meet the government's registration requirements, especially the requirement for a permanent presence in eight of the country's 14 administrative units, to acquire central registration, as well as the requirement that 50 members must apply for registration in a specific locality. Although the number of members was lowered from 100 to 50 under the new religion law, some religious groups said the minimum requirement of members still constituted a barrier for them. Unregistered religious groups said their inability to register made them subject to harassment by local authorities and criminal sanction for engaging in "illegal" religious activities.

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

According to some Christian groups, after the adoption of the new religion law in July, many churches again attempted to register but remained unregistered, some because the government rejected their applications for technical reasons, including typographical errors, and others because the process was not yet complete. In Tashkent, these included Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal Life Water Church, Pentecostal Source of Life Church, and Pentecostal New Wave Church. Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Halls also remained unregistered in Urgench, Fergana, Bukhara, Samarkand, Nukus, and Karshi. The Pentecostal Full Gospel churches in the cities of Khanabad, Kungrad, Chimbay, Gulistan, and Jizzakh remained unregistered, along with two in the city of Nukus.

Jehovah's Witnesses again stated that because the government considered illegal any religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses outside the one registered religious building in Chirchik, the group remained a potential target for harassment and mistreatment, although there were no reported raids during the year. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said the group's one registered site in Chirchik did not adequately meet their needs due to their growing numbers. The group had repeatedly attempted to register in seven districts of the country before the new religion law was passed, but the government had rejected their application at the mahalla level, the first step in the registration process. On January 27, Jehovah's Witnesses filed an appeal with the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding six of its seven unsuccessful registration attempts. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to await the final decision of the committee at year's end. On August 16, Jehovah's Witnesses attempted to receive the concurrence of the CRA (preapproval) and the Tashkent and Samarkand khokimiyats to register in those cities under to the new religion law. According to representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the CRA and khokimiyats of Tashkent and Samarkand rejected their applications on August 16, September 10, and September 11, respectively, stating that the religious group must submit "appropriate letters of guarantee" from the regional branches of the Ministry of Construction, the State Sanitary and Epidemiological Service, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Department of the State Fire Safety Service. On October 8, the Tashkent branch of the Ministry of Construction denied Jehovah's Witnesses a letter of guarantee, stating that it was not within its purview to issue such a letter.

The Ministry of Education continued to maintain a dress code regulating the length of hair and dress, the color of uniforms, and the type of shoes for all pupils in both public and private schools. On September 3, education authorities decreed schoolgirls were allowed to wear skullcaps and Islamic headdresses, including hijabs, a reversal of previous rules preventing the wearing of religious dress in state-owned premises. Religious freedom advocates stated that in the beginning of the year, before the adaptation of the new religion law, there were reports some schools and universities did not permit women and girls wearing hijabs to attend.

On June 28, a court sentenced Islamic blogger Fozilkhoja Arifkhodjaev to 15 days in prison for "violating public order" stemming from his calling preacher Abror Abduazimov (known as Mukhtor Ali) a "hypocrite." On July 14, Tashkent's Mirobod District Criminal Court ordered Arifkhodjaev held in three-month pretrial detention while the criminal case against him was under investigation. While in detention, police searched Arifkhodjaev's phone and discovered photoshopped images of Abduazimov and other "respected Uzbek scholars," and authorities opened a criminal case against him under the section of the criminal code dealing with the production, storage, distribution, or display of materials that threaten public safety and public order. A judge ruled that he had committed a crime on March 6, the date when Arifkhodjaev photoshopped the images. On July 17, the Tashkent Criminal Court rejected an appeal against the three-month detention order submitted by Arifkhodjaev's lawyer, Sergei Mayorov. Mayorov reported he had no access to his client for the 15 days following Arifkhodjaev's detention on June 28, despite Mayorov's complaints to various state agencies, including the General Prosecutor's office. Mayorov also said police had "psychologically tortured" his client. Arifkhodjaev remained in detention in Tashkent's Investigation Prison No. 1 at year's end.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported that on June 8, authorities summoned dozens of practicing Muslim men to the Angren police station in the eastern part of the country, where police officers forcibly shaved their beards off. According to RFE/RL, police threatened to charge men who refused to shave with disobeying law enforcement officials. On May 10, a video circulated on the internet allegedly showing a police official in the eastern city of Namangan instructing his subordinates to single out men with beards and force them to shave, and to document the process, taking the men's pictures before and after shaving. According to human rights defenders, authorities rejected the reports, saying that in some cases, citizens were "asked to shave off their beards in order to have the appearance that corresponds to their pictures in identification documents," which the human rights advocates said was not a legal requirement. The chair of the human rights NGO Ezgulik, Abdurakhman Tashanov, reported his organization had registered numerous cases in which police forced practicing Muslim men to shave their beards.

According to the CRA and Muslim religious leaders, the government continued to review the content of imams' sermons, as well as the volume and substance of Islamic materials published by the Muftiate. Religious leaders said the government ensured CRA control over the Muftiate by selecting

the Muftiate's staff and circulating approved sermons for prayer services. The government did not legally limit the volume of public calls to prayer, although many mosques continued to voluntarily do so, according to media sources.

During the year, the Ministry for the Support of the Mahalla and the Family was tasked with ensuring close cooperation between national and regional level government and local mahallas on issues of women, family, and social structures, thereby more formally linking the government and mahalla actions, including those involving religious matters. This move increased the responsibility of mahallas in overseeing the daily activities of religious groups in their areas.

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

On March 3, the national government ordered the transfer of a historic Roman Catholic Church, built in 1905 in Fergana and under municipal ownership, to the Church in accordance with a Cabinet of Ministers resolution authorizing the transfer. According to representatives of the Catholic Church, however, Fergana City authorities took no further action and the building remained in the hands of city authorities through year's end.

According to local media, in May, the only functioning Buddhist temple in Central Asia – a temple with more than 200 mainly ethnic Korean members, in Tashkent Region – received a notice that the government would acquire its land for the construction of an elevated metro line. Alexander Khegay, Deputy Abbot of the Buddhist temple, expressed the community's concern about the threat of demolition and legal uncertainty. Khegay said the regional khokimiyat had not contacted him to discuss compensation since May, as required by the country's land code.

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 potentially vulnerable to police harassment and abuse because such gatherings remained illegal.

The government continued to state that prisoners had the right to practice any religion or no religion. According to human rights activists, including a prominent former religious prisoner and current human rights defender, some prisoners continued to tell family members they were not able to observe religious rituals that conflicted with the prison's schedule of activities. Such observances included traditional Islamic morning prayers. According to human rights activists, authorities continued to forbid prisoners from observing religious holidays such as Ramadan while incarcerated, including fasting, although by law, authorities were not authorized to impose such a restriction. Authorities stated religious practice was voluntary and that it should not violate the internal regulations of a penitentiary or infringe on the rights and legitimate interests of other inmates. Although some prison libraries provided copies of the Quran and the Bible, family members continued to state authorities did not allow some religiously observant prisoners access to religious materials.

The government continued to limit access to Islamic publications deemed extremist and during the year arrested individuals attempting to import or publish religious literature without official permission. 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.

Forum 18 reported that on July 1, a Tashkent court sentenced Odilbek Khojabekov to a five-year prison term with hard labor for returning from the Hajj with Islamic literature, instead of a five-year suspended sentence originally imposed in January 2020. This new court decision followed a change in testimony by police and prosecutors, who had earlier given a positive assessment of Khojabekov. Following Khojabekov's failure to appear for July 1 court hearing, a Tashkent court issued an arrest warrant for him. Khojabekov's family told Forum 18 the State Security Service's secret police pressured police and prosecutors into giving false testimony that culminated in the prison sentence. Prominent human rights lawyer Mayorov said he believed the decision to imprison Khojabekov for five years might have been due to his criticism on Facebook of imams who described the celebration on March 8 of International Woman's Day celebration as "an Islamic holy day of mothers." Khojabekov had stated, "Considering March 8 a holy day is a sin for a Muslim."

Forum 18 reported that on January 18, a Tashkent court fined Tatyana Akhmadiyeva, a member of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation in Tashkent's Yashnobod District, 1.115 million soum (\$100) for offering 15 Christian magazines to her neighbors at a Christmas celebration in her home.

On December 28, according to Forum 18, Lieutenant Colonel Rajapov and officer Karimov raided the homes of every neighbor they knew had a copy of the *Herald of Truth* magazine and confiscated it. Forum 18 reported that several of the neighbors were coerced into writing statements about how they received the magazines. On February 12, the Tashkent City Criminal Court upheld the lower court's decision to fine Akhmadiyeva and to order the magazines destroyed. An officer with the police department's Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department told Akhmadiyeva the magazines had been sent to the Religious Affairs Committee for "expert analysis." The court stated, "The Baptist magazines were imported into Uzbekistan illegally, and their distribution violates the religion law, although they do not contain information contrary to the law. The magazines should be destroyed."

Religious activist Adham Atajanov (pen name Abu Muslim) reported his request to publish interpretations of two Islamic texts remained pending with the CRA. Atajanov sought permission in 2019 to publish interpretations of five texts. He received permission to publish two of the books in October 2020 and received verbal assurance that he could publish one book during the year, but the CRA had not granted official permission. He said the CRA was reviewing the two remaining proposed publications at year's end.

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

The Bible Society of Uzbekistan reported that during the year, Christians could continue to request a Bible from the society in English, Russian, or Uzbek. According to some Christian groups, there was a shortage of Uzbek-language Bibles (*Muqaddas Kitob*), particularly in regions outside Tashkent. The Bible Society reported that the CRA did not approve a new print run of Bibles or the registration of Christian children's books.

According to Muslim representatives, some official imams continued to state 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 were available but limited to adults.

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

The government continued to fund an Islamic university and the preservation of Islamic historic sites. The government prohibited Islamic religious institutions from receiving private funding other than for construction and repairs. It did not permit funding 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 said the academy worked to improve the research and professional skills of scholars; educate graduate students in the fields of Quranic studies, Islamic law, the science of hadith, and *kalam* (Islamic doctrine); and engage in research, teaching, and public outreach. The government reported that 1,692 persons were studying at the academy during the year.

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

There were three public Islamic training academies to prepare clerics in the country and 10 madrassahs for secondary education. Additionally, two Christian seminaries continued to function. The Quran courses offered at Islamic religious educational institutions were attended by 1,940 students during the year. Sources reported that COVID-19 restrictions reduced enrollment, particularly of international students from the region.

According to media, during the year, the government tightened control over students studying at religious educational institutions abroad. On June 20, RFE/RL reported that the government recalled approximately 1,500 youth studying at religious schools in Egypt in recent months. The embassy of Uzbekistan in Egypt posted a statement on its website expressing concern that "most citizens" were being taught at "dubious establishments and centers" in Cairo. According to RFE/RL, the reasons the government had decided to recall students studying Islam in Egypt and Turkey were vague, but authorities were not only working to bring back some of their citizens studying Islam in Egypt and Turkey, but also tightening control over who could leave the country to study religion abroad. On June 24, *kun.uz* reported that beginning in 2021, citizens of Uzbekistan would be admitted to all institutions of al-Azhar University in Egypt only with the CRA's recommendation. According to *kun.uz*, the Advisory Council on Assistance to Citizens of Uzbekistan in Foreign Religious Educational Institutions, established under CRA, would review and consider all applications to study at the Al-Azhar complex.

Umrah and Hajj regulations continued to require pilgrims to apply to local mahalla committees, which submitted a list to the khokimiyats. The CRA used the khokimiyats' lists to coordinate ticketing on national air carrier flights to Jeddah. Local mahalla committees, district administrations, security services, CRA, and the Muftiate reportedly participated in vetting potential pilgrims. The state continued to maintain a monopoly on organizing the Umrah pilgrimage and controlling the lists of pilgrims. At a press conference on July 12, CRA Deputy Head Dilshod Eshanev stated that private tour operators were not authorized to organize Umrah pilgrimages or obtain visas for pilgrims because "the documents do not provide for it." In 2020, the Muftiate requested that the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tashkent issue umrah visas only to citizens from a list provided by the Muftiate. A Tashkent-Jeddah flight was not available to passengers ticketed by private travel agencies.

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

Civil society observers and religious freedom activists continued to report that authorities allowed Muslims to celebrate Ramadan openly, but they said COVID-19 restrictions affected the number of public iftars held, and authorities urged citizens to celebrate the holiday at home. The Special Commission to Control COVID-19 recommended that from June 28 to September 24, there should be no large gatherings of worshippers indoors during religious services and that, if possible, religious rites should be held outdoors (within the boundaries of property controlled by religious organizations).

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Activists and human rights groups continued to report social pressure among the majority Muslim population against conversion from Islam. Religious community members said ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity risked harassment and discrimination. Some said social stigma 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.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of individuals being attacked for their conversion to a minority faith but reports of harassment continued. Non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious groups reported pressure on ethnic Uzbeks who converted to Christianity by local imams, who in their sermons urge them to accept Islam, as "otherwise they would face death, including at the hands of the Taliban." One non-Muslim religious group expressed concern about the content of sermons preached by some Tashkent imams, who during Islamic religious rituals called for killing Christians, calling them pigs and Christian women prostitutes.

Members of religious groups perceived as proselytizing, including evangelical Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to state they faced societal scrutiny and discrimination in the form of hostility from neighbors, shunning in public, difficulty doing business in their communities, and overt shadowing of their daily routines by security services.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officials and senior officials from the Department of State and other agencies and branches of the United States government 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 increase religious freedom by registering more religious organizations, streamlining registration, improving the new religion law to allow members of religious groups to practice their faiths freely outside registered houses of worship, and allowing parent to educate their children in their faith. Embassy officials raised concerns about the deficiencies of the religious law prior to and after its adoption with government officials. U.S. officials also raised the issue of the treatment of prisoners and the existence of religious prisoners, 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 and remove restrictions on the importation and use of religious literature, in both hardcopy and electronic versions. They also raised the difficulties religious groups and faith-based foreign aid organizations faced with registration and with

authorities' limiting their access to religious literature. Senior U.S. government officials urged the government to prioritize a visit to the country by UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Shaheed.

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 maintained contact with religious groups, human rights activists, and other civil society representatives to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Topics included the registration of minority religious groups, religious education for children, and concerns of Muslims about 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 conscience and belief. Embassy engagement included meetings with virtually all major religious denominations in the country, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptist groups, Jewish leaders, Muslim scholars, and religious freedom activists. In September, the Ambassador visited the Roman Catholic church in Fergana to discuss with the resident priest local authorities' delay in handing over the property to the Catholic Church, as required by court order.

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