

2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Uzbekistan

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Executive Summary

The constitution and some laws provide for religious freedom; however, other laws and policies restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced those restrictions. The law restricts the religious freedom of unregistered groups and prohibits many activities, such as proselytizing. Members of registered and unregistered minority religious groups faced jail terms, heavy fines, confiscation and destruction of religious literature, and in some cases police beatings for violations of these laws. There were reports of deaths in custody, torture, beatings, denial of religious practice, and other harsh treatment of prisoners the government considered religious extremists. The government continued to deal harshly with Muslims who discussed religious issues outside of sanctioned mosques. The government was generally more permissive toward the activities of worshippers at sanctioned mosques and permitted the regular activities of religious groups historically present in the country, including the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Russian Orthodox communities.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Society generally was tolerant of religious groups, however, and religious groups were generally tolerant of one another.

U.S. government representatives directly engaged with the government on religious freedom, including during a July visit by a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, Democracy, and Labor. Embassy and visiting U.S. officials met with representatives of religious groups, civil society, and government bodies, as well as relatives of prisoners, to discuss freedom of conscience and belief. Since November 2006, the Secretary of State has designated Uzbekistan a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In August 2011, the Secretary of State redesignated Uzbekistan as a CPC. U.S. officials discussed with the government tangible steps it could take to improve its record on religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.7 million (July 2013 estimate). Local statistics indicate that approximately 93 percent is Muslim. Most are Sunni of the Hanafi School; approximately 1 percent is Shia, concentrated in the provinces of Bukhara and Samarkand. Approximately 4 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, a number that is declining as ethnic Russians and other Slavs continue to emigrate. The remaining 3 percent includes small communities of Roman Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Bahais, Hare Krishnas, and atheists. An estimated 6,000 Ashkenazi and 2,000 Bukharan Jews remain concentrated in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley, but the Jewish population continues to decline due to emigration.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and some laws provide for religious freedom; however, other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience to all and states everyone shall have the right to profess or not to profess any religion; the law provides for freedom of worship, freedom from religious persecution, separation of religion and state, and the right for religious groups to establish schools and train clergy. The law grants these rights, however, only to registered groups. The law also restricts religious rights that it judges to be in conflict with national security, prohibits proselytizing, and requires religious groups to obtain a license to publish or distribute materials.

The government prohibits religious groups from forming political parties and social movements. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), a government agency accountable to the Cabinet of Ministers, must approve all religious literature. The Council for Confessions, under the CRA, includes representatives from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups, and discusses ways of ensuring compliance with the law, the rights of religious organizations and believers, and other issues related to religion.

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

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

There are 2,223 registered religious groups representing 16 denominations. There are 2,051 Muslim groups (including mosques, educational institutions, and Islamic centers). Among the Muslim groups are several Shia congregations. Registered minority religious groups include the ethnic

Korean Christian, Russian Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal (Full Gospel), Seventh-day Adventist, Jewish, Catholic, Bahai, Lutheran, New Apostolic, Armenian Apostolic, Jehovah's Witnesses, Krishna Consciousness, Temple of Buddha, and Christian Voice of God Church communities, as well as one interconfessional Bible society.

The criminal and administrative codes contain severe penalties for violating the law and other statutes on religious activities. The criminal code formally distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are those not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups viewed as "extremist."

The government classifies as "religious extremists" those groups or individuals advocating replacement of the current secular government and laws with a government and laws based on strictly sectarian religious principles. It perceives "religious extremism" as a threat to domestic security and stability. As a result, the government's policy is to ban Islamic groups it broadly determines to be extremist and to criminalize membership in such groups, which include Akromiya, Tablighi Jamaat, and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The government also bans Nur, founded by Kurdish Mullah Said Nursi and associated with the religious teachings of Turkish scholar Fethullah Gullen, despite the group's condemnations of violent extremism.

The government asserts that its actions against persons or groups suspected of "religious extremism" are not a matter of religious freedom, but rather of preventing overthrow of the secular authorities and precluding incitement of interreligious and ethnic instability and hatred in a multi-ethnic, multiconfessional society. There are penalties of up to 20 years in prison for "organizing or participating" in the activities of "religious extremist," fundamentalist, separatist, or other prohibited groups.

It is a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of four million to eight million soum (\$1,788-\$3,576) to organize or participate in an illegal religious group. In addition, the code punishes proselytism with up to three years in prison. After an offender is punished for a violation under the administrative code, a repeat offense may be tried under the criminal code. In addition to prohibited activities that include organizing an illegal religious group, the law proscribes efforts to draw minors into religious organizations without the permission of their parents and persuading others to join illegal religious groups. Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious organization is illegal.

The administrative code punishes "illegal production, storage, import, or distribution of materials of religious content" with a fine of 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage of 91,530 soum (\$41) for individuals or, for officials, 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly wage, together with confiscation of the materials and the "corresponding means of producing and distributing them." The criminal code also imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly wage or corrective labor of up to three years for these offenses.

The law limits the right to publish, import, and distribute religious literature solely to registered central offices of religious groups. These are the Bible Society of Uzbekistan (BSU), the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, Tashkent Islamic University, Tashkent Islamic Institute, and the offices of the Russian Orthodox, Full Gospel, Baptist, and Roman Catholic churches.

The law allows only those religious groups with a registered central administrative body to train religious personnel. Registration of a central administrative body requires registered religious

groups to be present in eight of the 14 administrative units (including Karakalpakstan and Tashkent City). There are six entities that legally may train religious personnel. The law limits religious instruction to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors. The law permits no private religious instruction and imposes fines for violations. The law also prohibits the teaching of religious subjects in public schools. Article 14 of the religion law prohibits the wearing of "cult robes" (religious clothing) in public places by all except those serving in religious organizations.

Eleven madrassahs, including two for women, provide secondary education on a full range of secular subjects. The Cabinet of Ministers considers diplomas granted by madrassahs equivalent to other diplomas, enabling graduates of those institutions to continue their education at the university level. In addition, the Islamic Institute and Islamic University in Tashkent provide higher education religion programs, although the Islamic University in Tashkent is a secular institution. There is no other officially sanctioned religious instruction for individuals interested in learning about Islam.

A 2003 decree restricts the activities of faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the law prohibits "actions aimed at converting believers of one religion into another (proselytizing), as well as any other missionary activity."

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

Government Practices

The government continued to imprison individuals on charges of "extremism," to raid religious and social gatherings of unregistered and registered religious communities, to confiscate and destroy religious literature, and to discourage minors from practicing their faith. There were reports of deaths in custody, torture, beatings, denial of religious practice, and other harsh treatment of prisoners the government considered religious extremists, and some reports of police beating members of unregistered religions. By continuing to deny registration to some religious groups and punishing members for their activities, authorities effectively deprived individuals of the legal right to worship, as provided for in the constitution.

Nongovernmental sources, including the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) and human rights NGO Ezgulik, estimated there were between 10,000 and 12,000 individuals imprisoned on charges related to "religious extremism" or membership in an illegal religious group, but there were no government statistics available to confirm or refute this figure.

Prisoners serving sentences on charges related to what the government considered "religious extremism" reportedly died in custody, according to family members, who also typically reported the bodies of the prisoners showed signs of beatings or other abuse. Authorities pressured the families to bury the bodies before medical professionals could examine them. Reported cases that fit this pattern included the deaths of 43-year-old Dilshod Iskhokov in May, 32-year-old Khusniddin Okkuziev in July, 35-year-old Samariddin Salokhiddinov in October, and 36-year-old Tavakkal Hojiev in November.

Nongovernmental sources reported authorities severely mistreated persons arrested on suspicion of "religious extremism" or participating in underground Islamic activity, including by subjecting those individuals to torture, beatings, and harsh prison conditions.

In June Nozimjon Musaev and Mansurbek Goziev, police officers in the Kurgantepa District of Andijon Region, reportedly beat Khimoyat Akhmedova and her daughter Oydin Khusanova, members of an unregistered local Christian community. The police officers detained Akhmedova and Khusanova at a local market purportedly for illegally selling fruit and reportedly kicked and punched Khusanova in the chest and face and elbowed Akhmedova in the back after they refused to admit their guilt. Authorities failed to investigate the allegations of brutality against the officers and instead brought criminal charges against Akhmedova and Khusanova for resisting arrest.

In July Captain Shukhrat Masharipov, of the Urgench Municipal Police Department, reportedly beat Sardorbek Nurmetov, a member of a local unregistered Protestant community, after detaining him at the train station. Masharipov reportedly hit Nurmetov in the head with a thick book and punched and kicked him in the chest and face, causing Nurmetov to become nauseous. Masharipov reportedly refused to summon a doctor. According to Nurmetov, the police did not conduct a credible investigation into his complaint against Masharipov.

Prison administrators reportedly charged prisoners convicted of "religious extremism" with organizing extremist cells within prison, or with other offenses that led to extended prison terms. There were also reports that administrators often charged prisoners who would otherwise be eligible to apply for amnesty with internal prison violations, rendering them ineligible to apply.

There was no further information available on 2012 reports that prison authorities in Olmaliq were mistreating prisoners sentenced on religious charges.

In July Vazira Alimova, the mother of 36-year-old Isroil Alimov, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in October 2000 for membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, complained that her "care packages" either were refused or stolen by penitentiary facility employees. In response, officials at maximum security prison UYa 64/48 granted Alimova a three-day visit with her son and allowed her to pass him clothing and foodstuffs.

In March authorities unexpectedly released Abdubannob Akhmedov, the last remaining imprisoned member of the group of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested in 2008. Akhmedov had been sentenced to four years for "illegal establishment of public associations or religious organizations" and had received an additional 2.5 years in prison in 2012 for failure to heed the orders of prison administrators.

Most prisons reportedly had special areas set aside for inmates to pray, and prison libraries had copies of the Quran and the Bible. Family members of prisoners reported, however, that prison authorities did not allow some prisoners suspected of "religious extremism" to practice their religion freely, including reading the Quran or praying privately. Restrictions included not permitting inmates to pray five times a day or refusing to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast. There were also reports authorities punished prisoners for "violating internal prison regulations" if they prayed at certain times of the day. In addition, there were reports authorities at the prisons in Koson and Navoi isolated and punished inmates who wished to fast during Ramadan.

Human rights NGOs indicated the government imprisoned a significant number of individuals for membership in prohibited Muslim groups. In February the official press reported a court had sentenced a group of 11 adherents of the banned Jihadisti (Jihodchilar) group from Kasansay District of Namangan Region to five to 12 years in prison for attempting to overthrow the constitutional order and inciting interethnic and interreligious hatred. In May the Kibray District Criminal Court sentenced nine individuals to prison for membership in the banned Tablighi Jamoat group, as well as for teaching religion to others without proper education.

The government enforced the law banning unregistered religious groups from conducting religious services. There were numerous reported instances of armed law enforcement officers raiding meetings of unregistered groups and detaining their members. On March 24, police and National Security Service (NSS) officers in Mubarek (Kashkadaryo Region) disrupted a prayer service held in the private home of unregistered Council of Churches Baptist community member Vladimir Khanyukov; the community refused to seek state registration based on its religious beliefs. Among other such incidents, police carried out raids in Samarkand in February; Nukus and Tashkent in March; Karshi in April; and in the village of Tuyabuguz in Urtachirchik District of Tashkent Region in June. With a few exceptions, authorities charged those detained with unauthorized religious activity such as worshipping, teaching, proselytizing, or possessing unauthorized religious material, and imposed administrative fines. In contrast to previous years, the authorities did not imprison individuals for such offenses.

There were numerous cases of arrests or convictions for membership in religious groups the government labeled "extremist." On January 7, the Tashkent Region Criminal Court sentenced eight individuals to eight to 18 years in prison for alleged membership in a "Wahhabi" group and for possessing banned religious literature.

The government continued to pursue the extradition of suspected "religious extremists" from other countries, including from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Ukraine, including those who reportedly had sought asylum. In March the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18 and family members reported the extradition from Kazakhstan of 38-year-old Khayrullo Tursunov. According to human rights activists who obtained a copy of the verdict, the Kashkadaryo Region Criminal Court sentenced Tursunov to 16 years in prison on June 6, on "religious extremism" charges. In November relatives expressed concern Tursunov had been placed in a prison for individuals suffering from tuberculosis, although he had not exhibited signs of this disease prior to his incarceration.

The government remained deeply suspicious of Muslims who worshipped outside state-approved institutions, were educated at madrassahs abroad, gathered socially to discuss religious issues, or were tied to known "Wahhabi" imams, a term the government and the press periodically used to describe Muslims whose intellectual or religious roots derived from the strict teachings of prominent imams of the early 1990s. In May the state newspaper *Toshkent Haqiqati* reported the Angren Municipal Criminal Court had sentenced 26-year-old Murodali Isroilov to seven years in prison for conspiring together with several other individuals while in Russia to create a clandestine extremist organization within the country to build an Islamic state and implement "Wahhabi" doctrine.

Courts sentenced members of minority religious groups to jail terms under the administrative code following searches, oftentimes without valid search warrants, of homes and offices. The Urgench

Municipal Criminal Court in April sentenced local Protestant Sharofat Allamova to 18 months of corrective labor and garnished one-fifth of her wages after finding her guilty of illegal possession of Christian literature and videos; a higher level court confirmed the verdict on May 29.

The government continued to carry out raids against social gatherings of those belonging to registered churches. On April 14, police in Tashkent raided the private apartment of Anastasia Tsai during a gathering of members of the officially registered Bethel and Jesus Christ churches. On April 22, the Yunusabad District Criminal Court in Tashkent fined Tsai and an additional five people 7.9 million soum (\$3,532) each, a decision which the Tashkent Municipal Criminal Court upheld on appeal without a hearing on May 17.

The authorities also fined representatives of registered religious groups for engaging in religious activities. In March the Kokand Municipal Criminal Court convicted Rasulldjan Akhmedov, a member of an evangelical Christian Baptist church, of an administrative offense for missionary activity and fined him 1.6 million soum (\$715).

A number of government entities, including the Ministry of Interior (MOI), NSS, Customs Service, and local police suppressed or confiscated religious literature. The authorities confiscated, and in some cases destroyed, illegally imported religious literature and materials, as well as the equipment used to reproduce it.

The government tightly controlled access to Islamic publications and required a statement in every domestic publication (books, pamphlets, compact discs, and movies) indicating the source of its publication authority. Generally, books published under the Muslim Board's imprint contained phrases indicating official sanction, as did other religious works published under the imprint of the state-owned Sharq and Tashkent Islamic University publishing houses. A few imported works in Arabic occasionally were available from book dealers, but literature that would be considered controversial by the government generally was not available in the marketplace. Those in possession of literature by authors the government deemed to be "extremists" or of any literature illegally imported or produced were subject to arrest and prosecution. For example, in October press reports indicated that police in Tashkent identified and closed an illegal printing shop set up by adherents of the Jihodchilar movement to print leaflets and literature with "extremist" content. The government prohibited Nur movement and other literature it deemed "extremist."

Religious groups and human rights activists reported that police raided private homes without cause and seized religious materials. In March unidentified security officials raided the home of Omangul Bekmuratova in Nukus (Karakalpakstan) and confiscated 40 Christian books, including copies of the Bible and New Testament, as well as translations of Christian literature into the Karakalpak language. Authorities brought administrative charges against Bekmuratova, a member of an unregistered Protestant community, for illegal possession of religious literature, and a local court convicted her on March 28, fining her 79,590 soum (\$36).

There were widespread reports of the authorities imposing fines for illegally possessing or distributing religious materials. In February the Samarkand Municipal Criminal Court fined Djamila Djurakulova, a member of an unregistered Christian group, 3.9 million soum (\$1,743) for possession, with the intent to distribute, of Christian literature and DVDs. The Samarkand Region Criminal Court upheld the verdict on appeal on March 7. On March 22, the Uchtepa District Criminal Court in Tashkent fined Nargiza and Ashraf Ashurov, a Protestant couple, 7.9 million

soum (\$3,532) each in absentia after police, without a warrant and in their absence, raided an apartment they were renting and confiscated Christian literature allegedly belonging to the homeowner.

The International Post Office in Tashkent continued to scrutinize all incoming packages and send examples of any religious material to the CRA for further examination and approval. If the CRA banned the materials, it mailed a letter to the intended recipient and the sender explaining the rejection. The CRA denied entry for both Christian and Islamic literature.

Customs posts engaged in efforts to prevent the inflow of "extremist" materials. For example, *Inson va Qonun*, the Ministry of Justice's newspaper, reported in July customs authorities in Surkhondaryo Region had prevented more than 11,000 pieces of literature, audio, and video materials from entering the country in the first half of the year.

Authorities also confiscated, and in some cases destroyed, Christian literature in Uzbek and Russian that was imported legally. There were dozens of cases in which courts ordered the destruction of Bibles in Uzbek and Russian. On August 23, the Samarkand District Criminal Court ordered the destruction of two copies of the New Testament and a copy of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) in Uzbek. The religious materials had been seized by authorities during a raid on a children's camp in Samarkand in June.

The government allowed the BSU to publish locally one book of the Bible in the Uzbek language and the BSU anticipated completion of the translation by 2015.

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

Members of registered minority religious communities often encountered difficulties when entering and leaving the country as authorities frequently seized religious literature for alleged customs violations. There were four such incidents in May involving evangelical Christian Baptists at the border with Kazakhstan.

There were reports security services continued their surveillance of religious communities. Human rights activists in Tashkent and Karshi reported persons with cameras had filmed participants in Friday prayer services at local mosques during Ramadan. Mosques often installed cameras, citing security concerns, but NGOs stated the government also used cameras for surveillance purposes.

In the name of security, authorities continued to closely observe social gatherings where religious issues were discussed, particularly among men, with several arrests based on participation in such discussions. In February official press reported authorities in the Fergana Region had arrested 15 women between the ages of 30 and 50 for organizing illegal religious worship. According to the reports, the women, who gathered to discuss religion, all were relatives of individuals imprisoned for membership in the Islamic Movement of Turkestan and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The women reportedly were sentenced to five to fifteen days' administrative arrest. Sources reported Muslims became more reluctant to discuss religion anywhere except in a mosque as a result of these types of arrests.

The government and local imams discouraged some public displays of religion considered to be foreign influenced. In some parts of the country, authorities questioned women wearing the hijab

and encouraged them either to remove it or alter it to reflect the more traditional Uzbek style of tying the scarf at the back of the neck. A report broadcast on state television in October criticized young women for wearing "alien religious clothing," apparently a reference to hijabs.

State-controlled and state-influenced media encouraged prejudice against certain minority religious groups, at times accusing missionaries of posing a danger to society and sowing civil discord. On January 9, *Toshkent Haqiqati* published an article in which a researcher at the Academy of State and Social Construction, a government institution under the president's office, criticized missionaries and proselytism, labeled the Jehovah's Witnesses a "totalitarian sect," and stated it was the "noble duty" of all citizens to prevent the deleterious effects of such groups.

Following an increase in government attention to unauthorized instruction in Islam, imams no longer informally offered religious education, a practice that, although technically illegal, local authorities sometimes had allowed in the past. In February and July state television aired programs warning parents of the danger of sending their children to *hujras*, traditional religious schools outlawed in the country. In an interview broadcast during the February program, Aziz Odilov of the Tashkent Region justice department said, "Where do the roots of religious extremism, dogmatism, and terrorism lie? In the private religious classes. It is there where their roots emerge."

The government enforced the law against the private teaching of religious principles. In July law enforcement officials in the Chinoz District of Tashkent Region brought criminal charges against Mirmuhiddin Mirbayzaiyev and his son, Sirojiddin Mirbayzaiyev, for teaching the Quran to school-age children in their private home. There were conflicting reports as to whether the Mirbayzaiyevs were convicted.

Authorities continued efforts to discourage children from practicing religion. Local officials reportedly continued to pressure imams to prevent children from attending Friday prayers. Some local officials, teachers, and police officers reportedly turned students away from Friday prayer services. School officials discouraged both Muslim and Christian parents from sending their children to mosque or church services, and some school officials questioned students about their religions and why they attended services.

The authorities continued a campaign of harassment and repression against members of Akromiya (Akromiylar), an informal association promoting business according to Islamic principles. The government-controlled media continued to publish negative personal attacks against the group and its members. According to authorities, the group attempted to overthrow the government through armed rebellion in Andijon in 2005.

The government continued to formally ban eight less well known religiously-based groups and informally ban other Muslim groups it considered "extremist." The government often accused defendants of being "jihadists," but it was unclear whether the government considered them members of the terrorist Islamic Jihad Union or whether the government used the term generically to mean "extremist."

Sources reported the government continued to instruct *mahalla* (neighborhood) committees and imams to identify local residents who could potentially become involved in extremist activity or groups, including those who prayed daily or otherwise demonstrated active devotion.

According to the CRA, a handful of mosques applied for registration during the year. A small number of unregistered "neighborhood mosques" still functioned in some areas for use primarily by elderly or disabled persons who did not live in close proximity to larger, registered mosques. The neighborhood mosques were limited in their functions, and registered imams were not assigned to them.

Minority religious groups continued to experience difficulties registering. Despite renewed efforts to engage with the government and address its concerns, no Jehovah's Witnesses groups succeeded in registering, beyond one group previously registered in Chirchik.

According to available reports, churches that remained unregistered after unsuccessful past attempts included Bethany Baptist Church in the Mirzo-Ulugbek District of Tashkent; the Pentecostal Church in Chirchik; Roman Catholic churches in Navoi and Angren; Emmanuel Church and Mir (Peace) Church of Nukus, Karakalpakstan; Hushkhabar Church in Gulistan; the Pentecostal Church in Andijon; and the Adventist Church, Greater Grace Christian Church, Central Protestant Church, and Miral Protestant Church, all in Samarkand.

Religious activity remained particularly difficult in Karakalpakstan, as all non-Muslim and non-Orthodox religious communities lacked legal status.

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

As in previous years, the MOJ cited the requirement for a religious group to report a valid legal address in explaining local officials' decisions. Some groups were reluctant to purchase property without assurance their registration would be approved. Others stated local officials arbitrarily withheld approval of the addresses because they opposed the existence of Christian churches with ethnic Uzbek members.

The government restricted Shia Islamic education by not permitting training of Shia imams inside the country and by not recognizing such education received outside the country. In November state television reported a court had sentenced Ravshan Gulomov, director of the Iran Friendship Society's branch in Samarkand Region, to five years in prison for "proselytizing Shia beliefs" by distributing religious literature from the Iranian embassy to Shia imams.

The Jewish community had no rabbinate because it did not have synagogues in eight different administrative units and therefore did not meet the requirements for a registered central office. The MOJ accredited a rabbi for the community in 2012 after a four-year gap and renewed his accreditation for an additional year in November.

The government limited the number of Hajj pilgrims to 5,200, or less than 20 percent of the country's allowed number of pilgrims. Local *mahalla* committees, district administrations, the NSS,

and the state-run Hajj Commission, controlled by the CRA and the muftiate, reportedly were involved in vetting potential pilgrims. According to reports from contacts in the human rights community in the Fergana Valley and Karakalpakstan, it was exceedingly difficult to participate in the Hajj without resorting to inside contacts and other sources of facilitation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Society generally was tolerant of religious groups, however, and religious groups were generally tolerant of one another.

In January vandals destroyed approximately 30 marble and granite gravestones at the Sadovoye Christian cemetery in Andijon. The police arrested an ethnic Russian former employee of the cemetery, who reportedly damaged the grave markers in retaliation for his dismissal, and brought criminal charges against him. There was no further information available at year's end.

Society was not tolerant of proselytizing. A number of nongovernmental media published articles critical of proselytism and of believers who belonged to minority religious groups the media outlets deemed "nontraditional." Muslim, Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish leaders reported high levels of acceptance in society while smaller minority groups reported isolated instances of intolerance.

Although the government did not prohibit persons from changing religions, there was social pressure, particularly among the majority Muslim population, not to do so. Ethnic Russians, Jews, and non-Muslim foreigners enjoyed greater freedom to choose and change their religion than did members of traditionally Muslim ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Uzbeks.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government representatives frequently and directly engaged with the host government on religious freedom, including during a July visit to the country by a U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, Democracy, and Labor. Embassy and visiting U.S. officials met with representatives of religious groups, civil society, and government bodies, including the CRA, to discuss specific issues of religious freedom, including restrictions on religious literature, nonregistration of religious communities, and other restrictions on worshipers. The embassy emphasized the importance of religious freedom by including religious leaders in its official events. As in past years, the U.S. Ambassador hosted an iftar, which included a discussion on religious freedom and tolerance.

When the embassy learned of difficulties faced by religious groups or faith-based foreign aid organizations, it intervened on their behalf where possible, contacting government officials. Embassy representatives frequently discussed religious freedom cases with diplomatic colleagues to coordinate efforts on monitoring cases and contacting government officials. U.S. officials urged the government to allow more freedom of religious expression and to include religious prisoners of

conscience in the annual amnesty, consistently emphasizing that religious tolerance and political security were complementary goals.

In August 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State redesignated Uzbekistan as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with this designation, the Secretary of State issued a waiver of sanctions on the same date to "further the purposes of the act." U.S. officials discussed with the government tangible ways in which it could improve its record on religious freedom, including liberalizing registration laws, training officials and clergy on international religious freedom standards, and guaranteeing the rights of individuals to practice their faith free of government interference.
