

UZBEKISTAN 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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 trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The law restricts the religious freedom of unregistered groups and prohibits many activities, such as proselytizing. Many members of registered and unregistered minority religious groups faced heavy fines and short jail terms for violations of these laws. The government continued to deal harshly with Muslims who discussed religious issues outside of sanctioned mosques. However, the government generally did not interfere with worshippers at sanctioned mosques, and permitted the regular activities of religious groups traditionally 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. However, society generally was tolerant of religious groups, and religious groups were generally tolerant of each other.

U.S. government representatives directly engaged with the government on religious freedom, including during the March visit of the ambassador at large for international religious freedom and the August annual bilateral consultations. 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. The U.S. ambassador hosted an iftar for representatives of several religious groups. In August 2011, the secretary of state redesignated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to government estimates released in August, the population is 29.7 million. The government reports that approximately 93 percent is nominally 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

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small communities of Roman Catholics, Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Bahais, Hare Krishnas, and atheists. An estimated 10,500 to 11,500 Ashkenazi and Bukharan Jews remain concentrated in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley.

There are 2,225 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 52 Korean Christian, 38 Russian Orthodox, 23 Baptist, 21 Pentecostal ("Full Gospel"), 10 Seventh-day Adventist, eight Jewish, five Catholic, six Bahai, two Lutheran, four "New Apostolic," two Armenian Apostolic, one Jehovah's Witnesses, one Krishna Consciousness, one Temple of Buddha, one Christian "Voice of God" Church, and one interconfessional Bible Society.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

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

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

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

The criminal code formally distinguishes between "illegal" groups, which are those not registered properly, and "prohibited" groups viewed as extremist, which the government bans altogether. In particular, 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 is a criminal offense, punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of 4 million to 8 million soum (\$2,000-\$4,000), to organize or participate in an illegal religious group. In addition the code punishes proselytism with up to three years in prison. 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. After an offender is punished for a violation under the administrative code, a repeat offense may be tried under the criminal code.

The government perceives "religious extremism" as a serious threat to domestic security and stability. As a result, its policy is to ban Islamic groups it broadly determines to be extremist, and criminalize membership such groups, which include Akromiya, Tabligh 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 its consistent condemnations of violent extremism. The government asserts that repression of

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persons or groups suspected of “religious extremism” is 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, multi-confessional society.

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 salary of 79,590 soum (\$40) for individuals or 50 to 150 times the minimum monthly salary for officials, together with confiscation of the materials and the “corresponding means of producing and distributing them.” The criminal code also imposes a fine of 100 to 200 times the minimum monthly salary or corrective labor of up to three years 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.

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

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

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

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including reports of imprisonment and detention. 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.

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 that the body of the prisoner showed signs of beating or other abuse. However, authorities pressured the family to bury the body before a medical professional could examine it. The February death of Abdurahmon Sagdiev, sentenced in 1999 to 16.5 years in prison for membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, fit this pattern, although local officials asserted that he died as a result of a beating administered by fellow inmates.

Nongovernmental sources reported that authorities severely mistreated persons arrested on suspicion of “religious extremism” or participating in underground Islamic activity, citing torture, beatings, and harsh prison conditions.

There were numerous reports of beatings and mistreatment of prisoners serving sentences for religious convictions. The Human Rights Alliance of Uzbekistan reported in March that prison authorities in penitentiary facility UYA 64/45 in Olmaliq (Tashkent Region), led by Captain Jurabek Pulatov, were mistreating prisoners sentenced for religious charges, subjecting them to beatings and placing them in isolation for refusing to denounce their beliefs.

In July three police officers in the Hazarasp district of Khorezm Region detained Jehovah’s Witness Gulchehra Abdullaeva after she returned from a meeting in

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Kazakhstan. According to Abdullaeva, the officers forced her to stand for four hours and refused to give her water. One officer named Atakhan then allegedly placed a gas mask on Abdullaeva's head forcibly and demanded that she confess that she read the Bible and proselytized at weddings.

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. The Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Defenders of Uzbekistan (IGIHRDU) reported in March that prison authorities in Karshi charged Murodali Ruziev with violating internal prison rules as a pretext to extend his incarceration. Ruziev was sentenced in March 2005 to seven years in prison in connection with his alleged membership in a "Wahhabi" group and was due to be released in April, but a local court extended his sentence by an additional 3.5 years based on the prison authorities' charges. Reports also surfaced that prisoners who would otherwise be eligible to apply for amnesty often were charged with internal prison violations, rendering them ineligible to apply.

Human rights NGOs indicated the government imprisoned a significant number of individuals for membership in prohibited Muslim groups. On August 21, state television reported that the Bostonliq District Criminal Court in Tashkent Region sentenced four individuals to between five and eight years in prison for offenses connected with membership in the banned Jihadisti (Jihodchilar) group.

Most prisons reportedly had special areas set aside for inmates to pray, and prison libraries had copies of the Quran and the Bible. However, family members of prisoners reported 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 also included not permitting inmates to pray five times a day or refusing to adjust work and meal schedules for the Ramadan fast. There were also reports that authorities punished prisoners for "violating internal prison regulations" by praying at certain times of the day.

Any religious service conducted by an unregistered religious group was illegal. There were numerous reported instances of armed law enforcement officers raiding meetings of unregistered groups and detaining their members. With a few exceptions, authorities charged those detained with unauthorized religious activity such as worshipping, teaching, proselytizing, or possessing unauthorized religious material, and imposed administrative fines. Among such incidents were raids that occurred in the town of Jarkurgan in Surkhandaryo Region in January, in the Yukori-Chirchik district of Tashkent Region in May, and in the village of

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Yangikurgan in Tashkent Region in August. As in previous years, the authorities imprisoned many individuals for such offenses, including several groups of Jehovah's Witnesses.

There were numerous cases of persons being arrested or convicted for membership in religious groups labeled extremist by the government. In April several media outlets reported that authorities had brought charges against six individuals, including Hamrokul Jalilov, an official at a state road construction company, for alleged membership in Nursafardiya, a neo-Sufi movement founded in the country in 2009. The IGIHRDU estimated that more than 250 Muslim believers were imprisoned during the year on charges of "religious extremism." In November the Yangibazar District Criminal Court in Tashkent Region convicted nine residents of Parkent District of membership in an illegal religious group and dissemination of materials containing threats to the public order. Two of the defendants received seven years in prison, while the other seven received three-year suspended sentences.

Nongovernmental sources, including the IGIHRDU and human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) Ezgulik, estimated that there were between 10,000-12,000 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. Although authorities in May released Sergei Ivanov and Olim Turayev, members of Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned since 2008 for illegal establishment of a religious organization after they completed their sentences, fellow Jehovah's Witness Abdubannob Akhmedov received an additional 2.5 years in prison in June for failure to heed the lawful orders of prison administrators. Several individuals convicted of membership in the banned Nur movement, including journalist Hamza Jumaev, also were released.

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 January Ezgulik reported, based on information from family members, that authorities in Kazakhstan extradited to the country Sherzod Shernazarov and his wife Hursand.

Members of minority religious groups were sentenced to jail terms under the administrative code following unsanctioned searches of homes and offices. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported in January that the Sergeli District Court in Tashkent sentenced members Pavel Toporov, Dmitriy Kozlov, and Ivan

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Lebedev to 15 days administrative arrest following a January 26 raid by police and National Security Service (NSS) officers. Others were assessed heavy fines.

Raids against unregistered church gatherings and social gatherings of those belonging to registered churches continued. Police in Kuvasai (Fergana Region) on July 8 raided the private home of Baptist Viktor Kotov as he, family members, and friends sang Christian songs. On July 26, the Kuvasai Municipal Criminal Court convicted Kotov of engaging in unregistered religious activity and fined him 315,000 soum (\$160). On August 9, police raided a summer camp in the village of Yangikurgan in Tashkent Region where members of a registered Baptist church were vacationing. On August 28, the Bostonliq District Criminal Court found four members of the church guilty of conducting an illegal gathering and issued fines of between 362,000 and 579,000 soum (\$180 and \$290).

The authorities fined representatives of registered religious groups. The Navoi Criminal Court fined Roman Nizamutdinov, head of a registered Baptist church, 2.5 million soum (\$1,250) in June for illegally storing books in his home.

Religious groups and human rights activists reported that police raided private homes allegedly without cause and seized religious materials. For example, the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18 reported in September that police in Olmaliq (Tashkent Region) raided the home of Nina Chashina, a disabled 74-year-old Protestant, and confiscated 25 Christian books, including seven Bibles and three copies of the New Testament, as well as 25 DVDs and 20 cassette tapes.

There also were widespread reports of the authorities imposing fines for illegally possessing or distributing religious materials. For example, in April the Mubarek District Criminal Court (Qashqadaryo Region) fined four members of an unregistered Baptist group the equivalent of between 63,000 and 315,000 soum (\$30-\$160) for possessing Christian books, brochures, and calendars.

The authorities reportedly deported a member of a religious minority group for suspected religious activities or affiliation. According to an appeal prepared for the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, authorities in Tashkent deported Jehovah's Witness Elena Tsyngalova on July 25 after two courts found her guilty of proselytizing and illegal possession of religious literature with the intent to distribute.

According to Forum 18, authorities in Tashkent Region in June denied an exit visa to Selimkhan Ragimkhanov, pastor of the registered Baptist church in Akhangaran.

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The decision was taken more than six months after Ragimkhanov applied, although the law requires a decision be taken within 15 days.

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

Local Protestants reported at the end of November that the Tashkent Region MOJ branch summoned representatives of at least five registered Protestant churches in order to hand over “statements on eliminating identified legal violations.” The statements explained that recent audits identified violations in the churches’ charters, in particular inclusion of activities that amounted to proselytism in the list of the churches’ intended goals. The statements requested that the churches amend their charters and submit a request for re-registration within a 30-day period or possibly face closure.

There were credible reports that security services continued covert surveillance of religious communities. Authorities raided several gatherings of both registered and unregistered Christian groups. Additionally, observers noted persons with cameras filming participants in Friday prayer services at local mosques. Mosques often installed cameras, citing security concerns, but NGOs alleged these cameras also were used for surveillance purposes. For example, in response to the installation of video cameras at a number of mosques in Namangan in February, some believers publicly expressed doubt at the official explanation that the cameras were needed to prevent thefts.

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. For example, police and NSS officers seized Christian literature during a February 7 raid on an ethnic Korean Baptist church’s Sunday worship service near Tashkent. The government and local imams discouraged some public displays of religion that were considered 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. There were reports in March by human rights organizations, confirmed

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by local business people, that police and tax authorities in Tashkent fined stores selling Islamic clothing and in some cases confiscated stocks of hijabs.

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. During a March 15 meeting, deputy head of the CRA Bekzod Kodirov reportedly warned representatives of religious minority groups that there would be severe consequences if the groups conducted summer camps involving children.

Due to increased government attention to unauthorized instruction in Islam, imams no longer informally offered religious education, a practice that, although technically illegal, local authorities sometimes allowed in the past. In June state television aired a documentary warning of the dangers of receiving religious education abroad and accused “evil forces” of seeking to sow discord among Muslims.

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 June Ezgulik reported on the arrest of 13 young men in Tashkent, reportedly for associations with “Wahhabi” groups.

In July the Expert Working Group, a loose network of local policy analysts, published a report outlining government efforts to discourage traditional “Muslim weddings” as a means of suppressing increased displays of religiosity, especially among returning migrant laborers.

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 July 14, an article in the MOI’s official Uzbek-language newspaper *Postda* described the “negative effects of missionaries and proselytism,” singling out Jehovah’s Witnesses in particular.

The government enforced the law against the private teaching of religious principles. A court in July fined Baptists Eduard Kim and Iosif Skayev each 315,000 soum (approximately \$160) for teaching religion privately.

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On August 22, a state television program recommended the population purchase only those books authorized by the government. The program stated that state control over religious literature was justified in light of “extremist” forces’ efforts to promote “destructive ideologies” in religious books.

In September online state media reported that the mayor of Tashkent issued a regulation specifying that the authorities would permit only imams selected from a government-approved list maintained by the MOJ to give sermons at weddings and other social occasions. In the name of security, authorities continued to closely observe social gatherings where religious issues were discussed, particularly among men, with several arrests based on participation in such discussions. Sources reported that for this reason, Muslims became more reluctant to discuss religion anywhere except in a mosque.

Authorities continued efforts to discourage children from practicing religion. 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. Human rights contacts in the Fergana Valley reported in October that the Muslim Board had issued a fatwa (ruling based on Islamic law) forbidding children under the age of 18 from attending prayers or generally entering mosques. In contrast to previous years, there were no reports of school officials sending girls home or rebuking them for wearing the hijab, and there were no reports of schools refusing to allow children to enter if their mothers’ hijabs were not removed or altered.

The authorities continued a campaign of harassment and repression, begun in 1997, against members of Akromiya (Akromiyalar), 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. The government claimed that the group attempted to overthrow the government through armed rebellion in Andijon in 2005.

The government formally banned as “extremist” eight less well known religiously based organizations. The government often accused defendants of being “jihadists,” but it was not clear whether the government considered them members of the terrorist Islamic Jihad Union or whether the government used the term generically to mean “extremist.” The government informally banned other Muslim religious groups it identified as “extremist.” In December the Tashkent Municipal Criminal Court convicted 16 individuals of membership in the “Islamic Movement

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of Turkestan.” The court sentenced 10 to prison sentences ranging from eight to 12 years and fined the other six 3.2 million soum (\$1,600) each.

Sources reported that the government instructed 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.

The government did not deregister any religious organizations.

After facing difficulties gaining registration in previous years, no mosques were known to have applied for registration. 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. Since 1996 the government has denied or left pending Jehovah’s Witnesses’ applications to register congregations in Tashkent at least 23 times and to register congregations in the provinces 13 times. Of the several Jehovah’s Witnesses groups in the country, only the one in Chirchik had registered status at year’s end.

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

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

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

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registered Protestant church in Karakalpakstan, Emmanuel Pentecostal Church, lost its registration in 2005. More than 20 Protestant and Jehovah's Witnesses congregations in the region have been refused legal status, making their activity illegal.

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

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

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

There was no new information available about ongoing attempts by the BSU and Jehovah's Witnesses to gain approval for imported religious literature held by the government, or the BSU's attempt to gain approval to publish locally one book of the Bible in the Uzbek language.

Authorities also confiscated, and in some cases destroyed, Christian literature in Uzbek and Russian that was imported legally. There were dozens of cases in which courts ordered the destruction of Bibles in Uzbek and Russian.

The International Post Office in Tashkent continued to scrutinize all incoming packages and send examples of any religious material to the CRA for further

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examination and approval. When 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.

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 (known as "Movarounnahr") 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. More controversial literature generally was not available in the marketplace. Possession of literature by authors deemed to be extremists, or of any literature illegally imported or produced, may lead to arrest and prosecution, but there were no cases reported during the year. The government categorically prohibited Nur movement and other literature it deemed "extremist."

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

The 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. 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 October after a four-year gap.

The government limited the number of Hajj pilgrims to 5,080, 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. Forum 18 alleged in the past that there were unwritten instructions prohibiting pilgrims under age 45 from traveling and that those who did travel were subject to screening, lengthy waiting lists, and high costs (including bribes). Reports from contacts in the human rights community in the Fergana Valley and Karakalpakstan confirmed that 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

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There were some isolated reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In September vandals destroyed approximately 40 gravestones at the Botkinskiy Orthodox Cemetery in Tashkent, but a quick police response resulted in arrests of the believed perpetrators.

Society was generally tolerant of religious diversity but not 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.

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

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

The Russian Orthodox Church operated two monasteries (one for women, one for men) and a seminary and offered Sunday school education through many of its churches. Other religious groups offered religious education through their religious centers.

Jewish leaders reported high levels of acceptance in society. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts or patterns of discrimination against Jews. The Jewish population continued to decline due to emigration, largely for economic reasons.

Ten synagogues continued to function (three in Tashkent; two in Samarkand; two in Bukhara; and one in each of Fergana, Kokand, and Andijon), but struggled for financial support. A Jewish secondary school in Tashkent’s Yakkasaroy district provided instruction in Jewish cultural studies, religious studies of the Torah, and Hebrew. There was a kindergarten in Tashkent for children of Jewish families.

In response to strong demand, women’s groups were organized at Tashkent Islamic University and the Islamic Institute, and at one men’s madrassah in Qashqadaryo Province.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government representatives frequently and directly engaged with the host government on religious freedom, including during the March visit of the ambassador at large for international religious freedom and the August annual bilateral consultations (ABCs), during which discussion of religious freedom issues played a major part. 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 human rights and religious freedom. The embassy emphasized the importance of religious freedom by including religious leaders in its official events. The U.S. ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar. In November the embassy sponsored a study tour by a group of young Muslim leaders to learn about the role of Islam and interfaith dialogue in the United States.

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

In August 2011, the secretary of state redesignated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern (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.”